ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

SECOND AUGUST NUMBER
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING
MY HALF OF HEAVEN
by Giff Cheshire

BEGINNING
FIVE GRAVES WEST
a new serial
by Philip Ketchum

Reducing Specialist Says:

LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

ELECTRIC Spot Reducer

Spot Reducer

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

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August 10, 1956
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RANCH ROMANCES

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HELEN TONO
Editor

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BOGART TALKS TURKEY!

Humphrey Bogart, Hollywood's famous "tough guy," sounds off on:

Whiskey:

("I don't trust anyone who doesn't drink!")

Wedding Bells:

("I had 4 very happy marriages. I liked them all!")

Work:

("Save your money and tell 'em to go to ----!")

60 P

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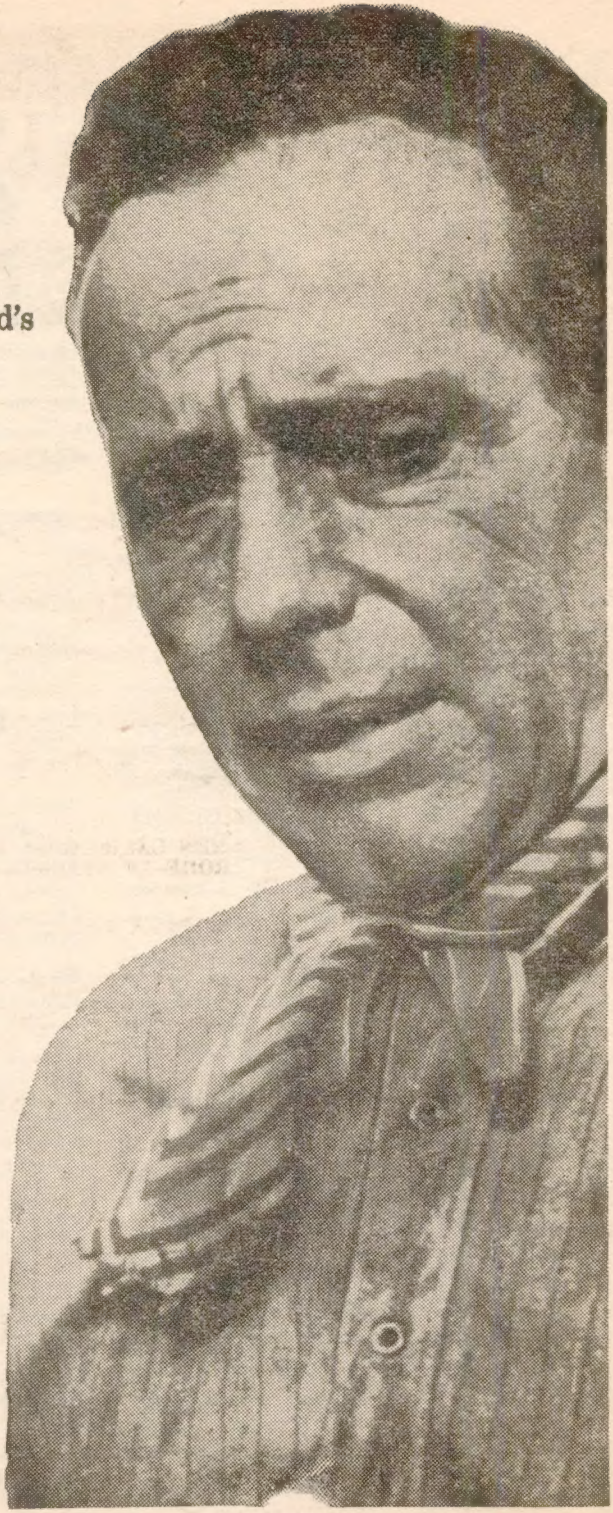

From Canada

Dear Editor:

I am 21 years old, 5'4" tall, weigh 126 lbs., and have light hair and brown eyes. My hobbies include all outdoor sports, and stage drama. At present I am manager of a group of girls on a drama tour of Canada. I'd be interested in receiving letters from men between the ages of 21 and 24 years old. I'll gladly exchange snaps.

PAT MELNIE

10172-145th Street
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada

Recent Tragedy

Dear Editor:

I recently lost my wife and so am in desperate need to make new friends. I am 34 years old, 5'7½" tall, weigh 152 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. I am a truck driver by trade. Would like to hear from everybody who reads this magazine, as I have been reading it for many years and think it's great.

C. E. STRICKLIN

General Delivery
Wauchula, Florida

Wants Pen Pals

Dear Editor:

I would like to join your column and receive letters from other mothers who live in all parts of the world. I'm a mother myself, with a married daughter and two stepsons. Will answer all letters, and hope that I receive a lot of them.

MRS. FRANCES DE GRADO

205 S. 7th Avenue
Marshalltown, Iowa

Canadian Miss

Dear Editor:

Is there a chance that a Canadian gal can find a spot in your column? I am 33 years old, 5'4" tall, with brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are collecting dolls and souvenirs, and doing a bit of gardening. Would like to hear from both men and women, no matter where they come from.

RUTH JONES

649 Windermere Avenue
Ottawa 3, Ontario
Canada

Two Lonely GI's

Dear Editor:

This is our second try to get into "Our Air Mail" and we hope we succeed this time. Rick is 6' tall, weighs 170 lbs., and has black hair and brown eyes. Eddie is 6'1" tall, weighs 175 lbs., and has brown hair and blue eyes. We are both 22 years old. Would like to hear from girls between the ages of 18 and 25.

PFC R. C. GATES RA 12439331
PFC J. E. BINKLEY RA 16439937

HQ & HQ Det.
34th QM. Bn.
Fort Lee, Virginia

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Pre-Teen Department

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 8 who is in the third grade at school. I would like very much to hear from boys and girls who are near my age. I will answer all letters, and will exchange photos.

LINDA SEAMAN

1702 Followthru Drive
Tampa 4, Florida

Looking for Pen Pals

Dear Editor:

I have written to you before, but never gotten into your column, so I hope I make it this time. I am 39 years old, with blue eyes and brown hair. I love baseball and animals. I get lonesome at times, and I know letters will help me very much. Please write to me soon.

MRS. LENA PEOPLE

430 S. Santa Fe
Pueblo, Colorado

Wants New Friends

Dear Editor:

I am a widow, 65 years old, 5'5" tall, weighing 138 lbs. I live by myself. I'd love to make new friends around my own age. Will answer all mail, so won't you write to me soon?

MRS. DEE EPPERSON

Box 356
Lonann, Arkansas

Far-off Land

Dear Editor:

Would you kindly enter my name in your pen pal corner? I am a girl, 18 years old, and my hobbies consist of collecting stamps, pictures, and labels. I also like to sing, and to read magazines and novels. Hope I hear from a lot of your readers soon.

MISS W. D. SREEMA WANA SINGMA
Kg/Deiyanwala Govt. School
Aranayaka, Ceylon

Has Handicap

Dear Editor:

I am 19 years old and 5'6" tall. I am very lonely because I am deaf and there are many things that I can't enjoy. However, I can read and enjoy my copies of RANCH ROMANCES very much. I would like to receive letters from girls and boys between the ages of 18 and 27. I like bowling, and have an old coin collection. Will answer every letter I receive.

WAYNE BARNES

201 S. 23 Street
Lexington, Missouri

Small Town Blues

Dear Editor:

I am 23 years old, 4'11" tall, weigh 115 lbs., and have blond hair and blue eyes. I have two children and I live with my folks. I work from two in the afternoon until ten in the evening, and since this is a small town, I get very lonesome. So please write to me. I promise to answer every letter.

MARY M. GAUTNEY

Box 1542
Parker, Arizona

Needs Friends

Dear Editor:

I want to put in my plea for pen pals. I am 36 years old, weigh 150 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. I don't get out much lately because of a nervous condition, so have a lot of time to write letters. I write songs and play the guitar. Will send my picture to all those who write me.

THOMAS BLAIR

Box 2
West Point, Tennessee

The Luck-less Type

Dear Editor:

I've never been lucky, so I doubt very much whether you'll print my plea for pen pals. But in case you do, here's a little bit about me. I'm 22 years old, 5'8" tall, with brown hair and green eyes. I like Western and old-time music. Would like to hear from anyone around my age, especially from those living on ranches in Canada and the U.S.A.

MILLY JACOBEI

Box 340
Wetaskiwin, Alberta
Canada

Wants Letters

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader for a long time and hope that you will print this letter. I am 31 years old, 4'8" tall, weigh 119 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. Best of all I like music, movies and dancing. My hobby is collecting salt and pepper shakers and hankies that have the maps of states on them. Will answer letters from both men and women.

MARIE SHRADAR

Route 4
Chariton, Iowa

Long-Time Reader

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for thirty years and enjoy it very much. I would like to get into your column and hear from ladies between the ages of 45 and 58 years. I am a widower of 60, 5'5½" tall, weighing 165 lbs., with dark hair and brown eyes. Will answer all letters.

BUD PRATT

P.O. Box 356
Bend, Oregon

From Way Up North

Dear Editor:

I just came back from Ankage, Alaska, and don't have many friends, so would appreciate some letters to fill my loneliness. I am 16 years old, 5'4" tall, weigh 109 lbs., and have dark hair and brown eyes. Will answer everyone, so please let me hear from you.

JUDI McFARLAND

1215 West 3rd
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Ex-Service Woman

Dear Editor:

I would like to make some new friends by mail. I just got discharged from the service after serving four years, and so I don't know too many people yet and it gets pretty lonesome. I am 21 years old, 5'5" tall, and have brown hair and eyes.

KATHERINE WESSELS

445 N. Pearl Street
Bridgeton, New Jersey

Old Faithful

Dear Editor:

I have been a faithful reader of your magazine for some time, and I would like to make some friends. I am 20 years old, 6' tall, weigh 170 lbs., and have brown hair and hazel eyes. Will answer every letter I receive.

PVT. KENNETH W. HOLLOBAUGH
RA 25870438
143rd Armored Signal Co.
3rd Armored Division
Fort Knox, Kentucky

Farmerette

Dear Editor:

Can you please help me to find pen pals? I love to write letters, but alas, I don't know who to write to. I am 32 years old, 5'8" tall, weigh 148 lbs., and have dark hair. Will exchange pictures. I live on a farm, so you can see that I'll be anxiously awaiting all your letters.

MYRLEEN WILLIAMS

Monroe, Utah

Lonesome Nurse

Dear Editor:

Please publish my plea for pen pals in your nice book. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange photos with those who wish to do so. I am a nurse, 24 years old, 5'7" tall, with blond hair and blue eyes. I'm looking forward to a lot of mail.

NELL HOPPER

1108 Mulberry Street
Pine Bluff, Arkansas

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

BEING a postman was obviously the wrong career choice for a Dearborn, Mich., mail-carrying rookie who made deliveries only 4 out of his first 16 days on the job, and dumped the rest of the mail in his attic. "I was tired," he explained, "and the load was heavy."

IF YOU have any coyote ears hanging around, the museum in Springfield, Ill., would like to have one. A coyote delivered to the museum for mounting arrived minus one ear, and it's no good to anybody that way.

FIREMEN, investigating an explosion that destroyed a Denver, Colo., home, asked nearby residents why they had not called the fire department when the house blew up. One neighbor explained, "I didn't think it was any of my business."

PAINTING his 1954 auto license plates in 1956 colors—because he couldn't afford to get new plates—got an Indianapolis, Ind., man a jail sentence. He did a nice job of painting, though; he's an art student.

TOUGHEST request Olympia, Wash., officials ever had to fill came from a Rhode Island schoolboy, who wrote, "Would you be kind enough to send me an official with the governor's name on it to put in my scrap book."

WINNING a $25 prize in a national contest did a Durant, Okla., man no good at all. The contest was sponsored by a liquor firm, making it not valid in constitutionally dry Oklahoma.

WANT AD in a Huntsville, Tex., paper: "For Sale—1932 Model A Ford. Affectionally called Lazarus because it's been raised from the dead."

TIRED of climbing stairs in Pueblo, Colorado's city hall, a reporter who covers that beat campaigned for 14 years to have elevators installed in the building. The campaign finally bore fruit but, riding in one of the new elevators, the reporter got himself trapped between floors. Now he's launched a 1-man drive for escalators.

LEAVING your car door unlocked can lead to disastrous consequences, as a Mexico City bachelor learned recently. Returning to his car after a short absence, he found a five-day-old baby on the seat.

THE hardest way imaginable of starting a fire must be the one reported in connection with a blaze in a Lafayette, Ind., home. The following sequence of events occurred: heat from the stove melted a pot hook hanging above it and caused a pan lid hanging from the hook to fall into a frying pan full of grease. The grease splattered on the wall and caught fire.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

STRANGER AT MY DOOR

A gun-slinging minister fights to reform a criminal, in Republic's new Western that combines violent action and touching human drama

A PREACHER and an outlaw are the chief adversaries in Republic's *Stranger at My Door*. But the odds are not, as you might think, all on the side of the man with the gun. Macdonald Carey, as the preacher, takes the law into his own hands and gives refuge to a notorious criminal, Skip Homeier, because he wants to prove that no man is so wicked that he cannot be reformed.

But don't think it's all talk and no action in *Stranger at My Door,* as Carey tries to show Homeier the path of righteousness. The picture opens with a spectacular bank robbery, which is followed by an even more exciting escape as the gang turns loose all the horses in town and overturns all the wagons to prevent the townsfolk from pursuing them.

Skip is delighted, of course, to find a hideaway in a minister's house, especially when Mac holds off the sheriff at gunpoint. He is amused by Mac's attempts to convert him and he makes love to Carey's wife, Patricia Medina, behind his back. Meanwhile he waits for an opportunity to get away safely with his loot.

Homeier has only one soft spot, a liking for the preacher's freckle-faced youngster, played by Stephen Wootton. And slowly he begins to admire Mac himself, especially after Mac buys a big brute of a stallion, planning to break it and to prove that any creature can be tamed by kindness.

Skip says cynically that there's nothing to be done with an outlaw horse—or an outlaw man—but kill him. And it looks as if he's right when Mac tries to ride the stallion. It's a tremendous scene; the magnificent beast gets completely out of control, and only the strength of the outlaw man saves the family from the violence of the outlaw horse.

There's more to the story than I've told you; it builds to an even more exciting climax than the scene described above. But maybe I'd better let that be a surprise. *Stranger at My Door* is an unusual Western, because though your pulse will beat fast at the

action, you'll probably shed a tear or two besides.

All of the stars of the movie are topnotch in their parts; they're as good actors as you'll find in Hollywood, even though lately you haven't seen them often in films.

Macdonald Carey, for instance, has been away from movies for two years, appearing in the Broadway hit *Anniversary Waltz*. Playing in the theater has actually been Mac's big dream ever since he decided to become an actor, when he was in college. He got his first break in a Broadway show back in 1941 and, though he was successful in Hollywood, he always wanted to go back to Broadway.

Skip Homeier is also a product of Broadway. He's only 25 today, but he has 15 years of acting experience behind him. When he was 10 he began his career in radio. At 13 he played the fat part of the young Nazi boy in *Tomorrow the World,* with Frederic March, which was later made into a film. The years in between have been spent in TV and movies —whenever they didn't interfere with his education. Skip has his diploma from UCLA now, and for the past few years he's been concentrating full time on his acting career.

As for Patricia Medina, when she arrived in Hollywood the return half of her ticket was for London, England. She had made some movies over there, but it was her husband, Richard Greene, that Hollywood had sent for. Patricia just came along with him for the ride.

She planned on a California vacation, while Dick toiled in front of the cameras. But it didn't turn out that way. A photograph taken on her arrival was published in the Los Angeles papers, and that was enough to put most of the major studios on her trail.

Pat has purposely kept her name off movie contracts, however. She likes to be a free soul, so she can go home to England when she wants to—especially when there's a good part for her there.

"Of course," she confessed to me, "I don't always know, when I accept a part, whether it's a good one. But I feel the same about movies as I do about men. I'd rather meet a dull one than none at all."

Frontier wife Patricia Medina ready to defend herself at gunpoint

JOHN DEREK
A Natural

ALMOST everything in John Derek's life pointed toward his becoming a movie star, right from the beginning. He was born and brought up in Hollywood; his parents were both in the movies; he grew up among movie people who could help him get that first big chance.

There was only one factor against his having a Hollywood career—his father's objection. But that was almost strong enough to offset all the others. In fact, John followed his father's wishes and studied painting until he was 17.

"One day," he said, "I realized that painters never seem to be famous until after they're dead. But actors, if they get to the top, enjoy it while they're alive. So I made up my mind to be an actor. I'm sure now that the decision was the right one, even though the reason for it wasn't."

It took a long time for John to prove to his father and to himself that he'd made the right choice. He got a contract with David O. Selznick, and spent the next year learning how to act.

"I was studying things I might have started learning in my cradle, if Dad hadn't been so dead set against my having a movie career," said John.

John's parents were both pioneers in the screen industry. His father was a producer-director; his mother had been a silent screen beauty who appeared in early Hal Roach and Cecil B. DeMille productions. Neither of them had long careers in pictures, and it was probably the lack of security in movie making that caused John's father to oppose it so bitterly as a career for his son.

John, however, doesn't try to explain his father's attitude, nor does he really resent it any more. He seems to have put his childhood completely behind him, and seldom talks about it now.

It was several years before his acting career really got started. Just when Selznick was ready to give him a part, the Army had a more compelling role for him. He served in the final stages of World War II in the Philippines, and later in Japan, before coming home to Hollywood in 1946.

Hollywood, of course, had long since forgotten John Derek. He made the rounds of the studios day after day, and finally got a contract with 20th Century-Fox. But that studio dropped his option at the first opportunity—before he'd even played a bit part.

At that point John picked a part for himself. He got a chance to read the script of *Knock on Any Door* and decided that he was a natural for "Pretty Boy" Nick Romano.

"This wasn't conceit on my part," says John. "All my life I'd been fighting that nickname. I hated being called 'pretty boy,' but it happened so often I figured it must fit."

John managed to see the star of the picture, Humphrey Bogart, who agreed that the name did fit. And when the movie came out, with John Derek in it, millions of fans agreed, too.

John has been trying to live down the "pretty boy" ever since, and he has just about succeeded. He has been playing a wide variety of parts, many of them as he-man Westerners. His latest Western was *Run for Cover*, his first movie under his new long-term contract with Paramount. He'll soon be seen in *The Ten Commandments*.

Probably because John is so used to Hollywood, he has never been dazzled by it. He avoids its parties and night clubs.

John's chief recreation is sports, especially riding, swimming and boxing.

He sticks to a regular schedule of study and practice in acting. "I'm making up for all that time I lost," he told me with a grin, "before I was 17."

Paramount

Born in Hollywood, John almost couldn't help becoming an actor

MY HALF of HEAVEN

by GIFF CHESHIRE

IF HE'D had time, Pike Keating would have cleaned up before he drove to Long Branch to meet the sisters coming in on the five o'clock train. But there had been trouble at the east line camp, and by the time he got back to headquarters he had to pile into the buckboard and hit the trail.

When he got to town the first man he saw was Pres Waters, the gambler Pike hated with all the fury of a young, unbridled nature, and then there was more trouble. So, by the time he reached the depot, he looked like a saddle tramp. There was a trickle of drying blood—of which he was unaware—on his chin, resulting from a cut lip. His swelling knuckles hurt him, but gave him a certain satisfaction. They had stretched the Long Branch tinhorn full length on the board walk in front of the Bullhead Saloon.

Long Branch sat in the middle of the desert, which ran flat and hot to sudden rock-ribbed mountains all about. The rails of

THE CANFIELD SISTERS stood to gain a million dollars . . . if they did nothing to stop the terror that threatened Half Moon ranch

the transcontinental came through the haze, and Pike was barely on the cinders by the depot when the passenger train screamed out of the pass. From its rush it looked as if it had no intention of stopping at Long Branch, even though it had whistled. But then it began to slow down.

The postmaster hurled a mail sack into the express car door as the train came in, while one that had been tossed out bounced on the grits. There were a few pleasant seconds in which Pike thought the train would pick up speed again, but then it ground to a stop. Far along the track, a brakeman dropped down and put a little box under the car steps. In the other direction, the expressman was lifting down a considerable heap of luggage. The brakeman helped one woman and then another down the steps.

Pike forgot his prepared welcoming speech entirely. Tramping along the crushed granite, which crunched noisily under his scuffed, run-over boots, he felt his neck grow hot. He had met few ladies in his life, and this pair hailed from Boston. He came up to them and touched his hat, a shapeless affair that had held water for too many horses and fanned too many campfires.

"Howdy. I reckon you're the Canfield sisters," he said.

Somehow he'd pictured them as a pair of spinsters, although he'd known they were younger than he was, which would make them under twenty-seven. But he had certainly never expected them to be so slim and pretty. One was as light as the other was dark, but otherwise they stacked up alike, and looked mighty pretty.

The dark one frowned slightly and said, "Are you from Half Moon?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"But I wired for Mr. Keating, the manager, to meet us."

Pike's shoulders straightened. "Lady, he did."

"You're Pike Keating?"

"That's the situation," Pike said.

At that moment he forgot all about being six feet four and strong and limber as a puma. The stubble on his face seemed to grow six inches past the grime of the skin, and his shabby body shrank proportionately. Then he sprang back to full stature, at the girl's continuing frown.

"Like it or not," he added.

The girl's cheeks turned pink, and she showed an awkward little smile. "I'm Letty Canfield, and this is my sister Hester. We sort of took it for granted that a man who could manage Half Moon would have to be pretty old—like our uncle."

"He wasn't old," Pike said. "A bullet cut him down right in his prime. And I'm not so young; I've punched cows for ten years. Now, are you ready to go?"

The blond Hester didn't seem any happier with the situation than was Letty. Not knowing how a man escorted a lady from back East, Pike took an elbow of each and propelled them down the tracks. He could see their eyes dart over the cowtown, as they came to the end of Main Street, where the buckboard waited. They weren't much liking what they saw.

"I'll drive you down to the hotel," he said, "then pick up your baggage. We won't start for the ranch till morning. The Senator isn't much of a hotel, but you have one advantage over most folks. What you don't like you can change."

"We can?" said Hester. "How's that?"

"You own it." They were at the end of the sidewalk, then, and Pike nodded toward the depths of Long Branch. "See all those signboards? Most of these places are yours, too—the Bullhead, the O. K. Mercantile, the bank, that livery stable—they call it the Elephant—and the Bald Eagle Cafe."

Both girls had stopped and were staring up at him. "We own them—in addition to the ranch?" Letty asked.

"Your Uncle Cash owned 'em, and he willed everything to you. Down there in front of the mercantile is where he was murdered."

"Murdered?" gasped Hester. "We didn't know it was that. Who did it, and why?"

"Some saddle tramp who got clean away," Pike said bitterly. "But it was a job rigged by somebody right here in town, and I know who."

"Hasn't anything been done about it?" asked Letty.

"Not yet," Pike said, "but it will be."

HE HELPED them into the buckboard seat, squeezed in beside the dark Letty, and drove them the two long blocks to the Senator Hotel. It was a long, false-fronted building that needed paint. Ragged curtains blew out of the open upstairs windows. He'd told Fink O'Reilly to prepare the bridal suite for them, and he hoped Fink had done the job right. His qualms stopped when Fink came bounding down the steps, a big smile on his Irish face.

"Welcome, ladies," Fink said, and made the smoothest bow Pike had ever seen. "Long Branch and the Senator are deeply honored."

Pike had hoped to achieve something like that at the depot, before his composure quit him, and he felt grateful to Fink. Glad to turn the ladies over to him, Pike drove back to the depot and got the baggage, of which there was enough to outfit a military expedition. When he had delivered that to the hotel, he turned the team and rig over to Jud Durnbow at the Elephant. Then he went to the mercantile and bought a complete new outfit of clothes, including a fine gray Stetson, which he carried with him to the barbershop.

When he emerged from there with a shave, haircut, bath and clean clothes, he felt more like continuing his duties with the sisters Canfield—but not much more. He had owed Cash everything, and had liked him better than any man in the world. He loved Half Moon, and liked this town of Long Branch. So he had been startled but had not rebelled when Cash's will named him to the job of managing the Canfield affairs for three years until the nieces learned the ropes.

The lawyer had done the corresponding with the nieces. Pike wondered if they knew they had to let Pike handle things, or forfeit the whole estate. If they didn't know yet, he'd see they found out. If he were going to run the shebang he would run it his way, not theirs. They couldn't fire him without firing themselves right back to Boston, and a lifetime of tea and brown bread instead of steaks and Johnny cake—a fate that to Pike seemed worse than death.

It was his duty, he realized, to take the nieces to supper. He had sent word in to Fred Foreman to outdo himself, and to set up the meal about six o'clock, in the Bald Eagle's dining room. It was close to that time already. Pike went at once to the Senator. Fink O'Reilly was at the desk, a look of beatific contentment on his ruddy features.

"You'd better let me fix up a place for the girls here, Pike," he greeted. "Half Moon's no place for critters like that."

Pike shook his head. "Cash lived for that pair," he said, "even if he never laid eyes on 'em. He kept 'em in ease and luxury back there, after they were orphaned. He sent 'em to finishing school and polished that off with a trip to Europe. He wanted 'em to have the best of everything."

"That's right," said Fink. "So they ought to live here at the Senator, where they can continue having the best of everything."

Pike frowned. "Not much. Cash always said that when they finally came out here to live with him, he'd teach 'em to respect where all that money came from. He didn't live to see the day, but I feel the same way on that point. It's time to rub some alkali on all that spit and polish."

"I'd hate to see it done," Fink said. "We have so damned much alkali, and so little of the other."

"Go up and tell 'em I'm ready to put on the nosebag."

Fink went up the stairs and returned, but a good fifteen minutes elapsed before the Canfield sisters came down. They had changed out of suits into dresses that took Pike's breath away, and he in turn was not unaware that both sisters gave him a sharp second glance. He knew that his face, with the grime, blood and whiskers cleaned off, wasn't too hard to look at, and the barber had put a little olive oil on his curly black hair. The suit fit, as did the new boots, and the felt of the Stetson was as soft as buckskin.

"If you'll allow me," Pike said, and dared to bow the way Fink had. He thought it came off all right.

Fred Foreman had done himself proud. Supper was waiting in the Bald Eagle's back room. It was hearty, and Fred's Chinaman was the best cook east of California. But the girls, when they saw the huge platter of prime steaks and all the hashed browns and

canned tomatoes, looked a little uneasy.

"Sit down and pitch into it," Pike told them. "There's more in the kitchen." He remembered in the nick of time to pull out their chairs for them.

"Tell me," said Letty, as soon as they were seated, "how did Uncle Cash get possession of so much of this town?"

It was not good manners for her to talk when a man was busy eating, but Pike charged that off to ignorance. "It's quite a story," he said, "and by the time I told it all this steak would be cold. So I'll try to make it short. Cash was big-hearted. He'd lend money to anybody that needed it. Six-eight years ago we had the damndest hard times you ever heard of. He had to take over one place after another to keep them in business. Afterward he held on because it gave him a kind of control over the town, and was a way to keep it decent."

"The—the Bullhead," Hester said hesitantly. "Isn't it a saloon?"

"And a gambling house," Pike said.

"Oh, we can't have that, Letty!" Hester said urgently.

Pike grinned at her. "Then how about the Sundown Variety, and Dugan's Dancehall, and Hooker Mary's?"

"What are they?"

PIKE wished suddenly that he hadn't brought up the matter. "Just places the bank lent money to. I told you Cash owned the bank, didn't I?"

"I'm particularly interested," Letty said, "in Hooker Mary's. What is it?"

"Well—a parlor house."

The ladies promptly dropped their inquiries.

Pike took them back to the hotel afterward, and saw they had turned subdued and

PIKE KEATING HESTER CANFIELD

thoughtful. He was going down the steps to the street again when Ralph Peeples, Cash's lawyer, came along with a bundle of papers under his arm.

"Going up to read the will to the girls?" Pike asked.

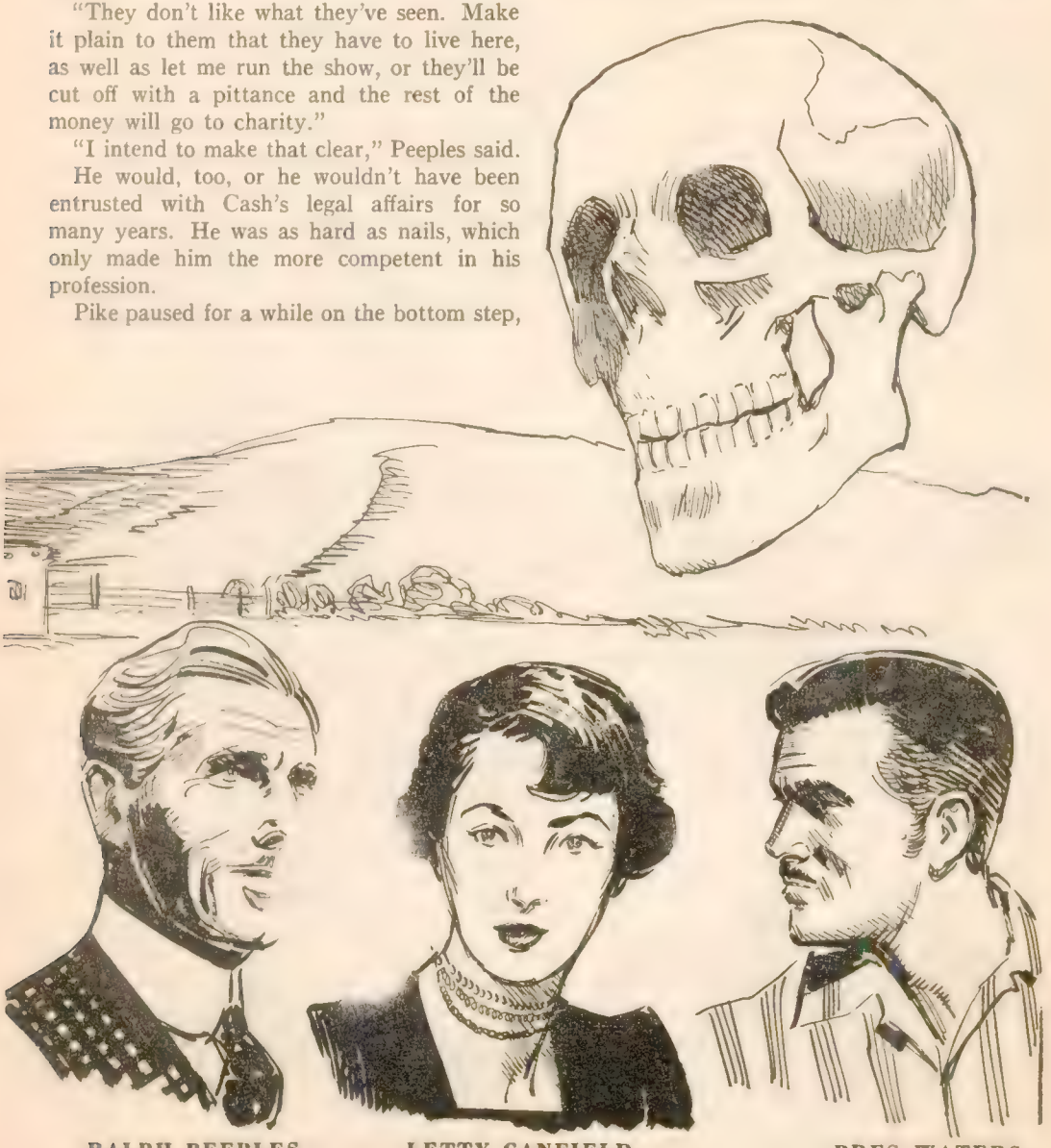
"I'm going to explain matters," Peeples said. "I didn't tell them much in my letters."

"They don't like what they've seen. Make it plain to them that they have to live here, as well as let me run the show, or they'll be cut off with a pittance and the rest of the money will go to charity."

"I intend to make that clear," Peeples said.

He would, too, or he wouldn't have been entrusted with Cash's legal affairs for so many years. He was as hard as nails, which only made him the more competent in his profession.

Pike paused for a while on the bottom step, looking both ways along the street. In the weeks he had been in charge, he had developed his own possessive attitude toward Long Branch. The managers and employees of the various Canfield enterprises had constituted a voting majority, and his winning personality had commanded their complete loyalty. Thus, he had been able to control the town



RALPH PEEPLES LETTY CANFIELD PRES WATERS

officials, and to keep the place decent but not blue-nosed. In the same way Half Moon had kept the whole country reasonably law abiding.

The trouble was there had been a lot of people who had wanted to have things different. Cash's backers had constituted only about half of Skull Basin; the other half was as wild and lawless and no-account as it had ever been. It had its own town in Flat Rock, across the desert, which had been the local metropolis until it was by-passed by the railroad.

Long Branch now was the commercial center of a prosperous cattle range. It was a loading point that brought herds from hundreds of miles around. Just as he had cleaned the rustlers and outlaws out of his part of the basin, Cash had seen to it that the new town became a place where youngsters could grow up, go to school, and keep as clean and healthy and rambunctious as children were meant to be.

His sudden, unexpected death had aroused instant and plentiful suspicion in Long Branch that the tough crowd in Flat Rock, and the riffraff still in Skull Basin, were seeking to turn things back the way they used to be. But the Canfield grip hadn't been broken with that murder; it wouldn't as long as the breath of life remained in Pike Keating.

Pike spent part of the evening in the Bullhead, playing stud with some cronies in from his part of the basin. Every game in the establishment was honest, and the stakes ran high. Yet his mind kept straying to the other element right here in Long Branch, places Cash hadn't owned, the real lowlifers in the town's sporting crowd.

If they hadn't been in on the plot to kill Cash, they had fallen right in with their friends in Flat Rock. Pres Waters represented them locally, and had made a jeering remark to Pike when he first hit town. Pres had gotten his hide tacked to the sidewalk pronto, but Pike knew that hadn't settled a thing.

The awareness of trouble still ahead was all that saved Pike later, when he was going to the hotel. There was a slot between the Bullhead and the building next door so narrow a man would never expect to be waylaid there. Yet something caused Pike to hesitate, to miss stride for just a second before he passed the alley. In the same interval there was a blasting roar, and a streak of flame gushed toward him.

It was a shotgun blast and, thinking instantly of the second barrel, Pike fell to his knees. He had grabbed for his gun and it was in his grip even as his knees hit the walk. He shot just as that second barrel let go, never understanding how he escaped being cut in two by the charges of buckshot. A man tumbled out of the slot and fell almost on top of Pike.

Climbing to knees that felt hollow and rubbery, Pike stared down for a moment. The pale streetlight let him recognize a man he knew only by occupation, a tinhorn who hung out in the Rialto saloon, where Pres Walters did his playing. Then doors were opening and men were pouring onto the walks to investigate the shooting. Pike felt a little sick, for he had never killed a man before, and this one was patently dead.

He was still dazed, later, when Justice Roberts convened a coroner's jury on the spot and the inescapable evidence brought forth a verdict of justified homicide in self-defense. When he was free to do so, Pike went straight to the room in the hotel Cash had always kept for himself. His knees still felt as if they couldn't hold his legs straight.

HE WAS half undressed for bed when somebody hammered on the door. When he opened up, Ralph Peeples came in. The lawyer had a look of extreme gravity on his face.

"You're sure living on borrowed time," the lawyer said.

"You never said anything truer."

"There's something I'd better tell you," Peeples said, as he took the room's one comfortable chair. "About two weeks ago somebody pried open a window in my office. I had a feeling they'd also managed to open my safe. I couldn't figure out why. I never keep any money there, just important papers. After what happened tonight, I knew why. Somebody wanted to familiarize himself with Cash's will."

"It must be Pres Waters or one of his cronies."

"Now, did I say who?" Peeples said.

"No, you didn't. But everybody knows why Cash was murdered. I've known, ever since, that I'm number two on the list. Waters hurried it up, after I hung one on his chin today."

Peeples shook his head. "It runs deeper than that. Here's something you probably don't realize, and I didn't either, till tonight. When Cash made that will, he figured to live a while yet. He expected you to live to a ripe old age. What we didn't think of, at the time, was that we left something wide open. The will makes you manager of Cash's estate for the next three years. It makes no allowance for your early death. If you were killed, as almost happened tonight, the Canfield girls would have the estate without any strings attached, as of that moment."

"They haven't had time to hire a gunman," Pike said, smiling.

"If you can joke, you're a calmer man than I am. Those girls have no conception of the value of the property they've inherited, or any understanding of the implications. They're just numbed and don't like it, particularly the fact that they own three more or less respectable houses of ill fame. If they had the power, they'd liquidate fast and cheap just to get out of the thing."

"Ah," Pike said. "So Waters is going to give 'em the power."

"Losing no time about it," Peeples agreed. "His backers have been itching to break the Canfield control of this town. And if you want a frank opinion, they have a good chance to do it. Watch yourself, Pike. You're a marked man."

Pike could only nod glumly. He hadn't been told anything he himself hadn't already worried about, but hearing it from so steel-nerved a man as Peeples was sobering.

Since he had trouble getting to sleep, Pike awoke later than usual the next morning. He washed up, dressed, and came down the stairs just as the Canfield sisters emerged from the hotel dining room. They both looked at him very coolly this morning.

"Had your breakfast?" Pike asked needlessly.

"Yes, thank you," said Hester, and her eyes did not meet his. "Buckwheats, eggs, steak, potatoes, coffee and dried apple pie."

"That'll put tallow on you, ma'am."

"I know," Hester said.

"Well, if you're ready to start for the ranch, I'll get the buckboard as soon as I've eaten."

"There's a question," said Letty, "as to whether we're going out to the ranch at all."

Pike stared at her. "Come again."

"Since we own this hotel," Letty said, "I guess we've a right to use that office. Come in there, Mr. Keating. Hester and I want to talk with you."

"Why, sure," Pike said, bewildered.

When they were in the little space Fink O'Reilly used for an office, Letty shut the door and stood with her back to it as if she expected him to try to escape. Hester looked distressed, but Letty seemed determined, angry. Pike had already gathered that she did most of the thinking and deciding for them.

"There are some matters that need clarifying," Letty said, "which Mr. Peeples wouldn't or couldn't explain. One is how you managed to so ingratiate yourself with our uncle that he left our affairs all tied up in you."

Pike walked over to Fink's chair and sat down, his temper boiling from the words she had used. He had ingratiated himself—with Cash?

"You said questions," he spat, "and that's only one. What else is in your craw?"

"Do you know how much Cash was worth?"

"I never had the slightest notion."

Letty gave a shrug that could well have been disbelief. "At least Hester and I had more grounds than you for claiming ignorance on that score. It wasn't until last night that we learned the estate amounts to just under a million dollars."

"And that's not enough?" Pike retorted.

He saw from Letty's staining cheeks that he had belted her a good one. "It seems to have been enough," she returned hotly, "to arouse your desire to handle it for us."

"All right," he said harshly, "I'll tell you about me and Cash Canfield. When he picked me up, I was a jailbird. How do you like that?"

From the stiffening of their faces, neither sister appeared to like it a great deal.

"I lost my folks even earlier than you did," Pike resumed. "But Cash knew 'em. I was a ring-tailed snorter, and I got to running with the wrong bunch. Finally I was in on a stage holdup that missed fire. I could have gone over the road, and I should have. But I was only seventeen, and Cash talked the judge into turning me over to him."

"And," said Letty, "he began to train you to take his place after he was gone."

PIKE stared at her for a moment. "You know what he really did? The minute we got to Half Moon he took me down back of the horse barn and peeled off his coat. He said, 'All right, you young turkey, let's see if you're as tough as you think.' I figured I was, but soon I found out that I was wrong. When I came to I was in the bunkhouse. Cash started me out on wrangling, and rode me harder than any two other men on the ranch. I hated him, till one day I found out that was wrong, too. He'd done what my own father would have done, if he'd lived."

Hester's expression had changed, yet Letty's face was still set and determined. "But why don't we have a thing to say about anything?" Letty asked.

"If you had full say, there wouldn't be a thing left in three years, that's why. Which isn't to say you'll have to wait that long. If you're willing to pitch in and learn, I'll be glad to turn things over to you as fast as you're able to handle 'em."

"There's something we want done right now," Letty said. "Hester and I weren't happy to learn we've been made a vice syndicate by inheritance."

"You mean the Bullhead and the Sundown Variety?"

"And Hooker Mary's. We want them sold, closed down, or dynamited, right now, or we're washing our hands of the whole thing."

"Now, you look here," Pike said. "You don't understand this kind of country. A cow puncher, freighter, or any other kind of jigger, works hard, risks his life, and goes without. He doesn't have a real home or womenfolks, and once in a while he's just got to cut loose."

"Let them cut loose in somebody else's place of business."

"If I sold those places I couldn't control 'em, and this town would turn into the stinkhole Flat Rock is. I won't sell them, and that's final."

Letty Canfield smiled at him. "We seem to realize something that you don't, Mr. Keating. If we go back East, we won't be the only losers. If everything goes to charity, it'll have to be liquidated, Mr. Peeples said. If that happened, you wouldn't have the job of running anything any longer, would you?"

Pike's jaw dropped. He had never thought of that, or considered the possibility that they might coolly turn down the whole proposition. Suddenly he knew he wasn't going to be nearly as high-handed as he had figured. All they had to do was take the next train, and it would be the end of everything Cash had wanted and planned for so carefully. Waters and the Flat Rock crowd would take over at once.

"You wouldn't," he gasped.

"Unless the places I named are disposed of before we leave for the ranch," Letty returned, "we leave for the depot instead."

"Look," Pike pleaded. "You wait a while, and if you feel the same way later, we'll talk about it again."

"Today, right now."

"I think he's right, Letty," Hester said. "Maybe we shouldn't be hasty. There was that shooting last night. If things got worse, we'd hate to be responsible."

For the first time Pike realized they had not learned who had been involved in the gun battle. He was glad of that, and hoped to keep them in ignorance. If they knew he had just killed a man they would trust his motives even less.

Letty seemed surprised at her sister's independence. Then she shrugged. "You want to go out to the ranch, then?" she asked.

"I do," said Hester.

Letty moved her cool glance back to Pike. "All right, but please remember that it's very, very temporary."

"Good enough," Pike agreed.

They were in the buckboard and traveling by ten o'clock, the back of the rig heaped

with baggage. This time it was the fair Hester who sat in the tight space next to Pike. The desert wind soon brought color to her cheeks, and after that show of spunk back there she had climbed a notch in his estimation. The trail wound off the desert floor and struck up into the canyons. Sage hills crowded them, with great rock masses rearing now and then on either side.

"They call this Skeleton Canyon," Pike commented. "The Indians butchered a party of miners here."

"How nice," Letty said.

"They'd have loved to get hold of a pair like you to make into slaves. That was the way it was when Cash came here, driving a herd; there was nothing but redskins, rustlers and renegades. It was he more than anybody else who made this into the nice quiet country it is now."

"Oh, it was?" said Letty.

"I wish I'd known Uncle Cash," Hester said quickly. "He hardly ever wrote a letter, just a line now and then."

"He thought a heap of you, though."

"I gather," said Hester, "that he thought a heap of you, too."

The canyons fell behind, and they were on the first mesas of the cattle range. The sisters Canfield began to take an interest in the surroundings, Pike observed. At noon he broke out the sack of sandwiches he'd had Fred Foreman put up. Around two o'clock they reached home range and, not long afterward, saw in the far distance the low huddle of buildings that was Half Moon headquarters.

He got a thrill out of their first look at the big, rambling old house. It lay under the cottonwoods and poplars Cash had set out, long ago. The house was low-roofed, zigzaggy, and worn with age and good living.

"Yours," Pike said.

"Don't you live there?" Hester asked.

He shook his head.

He let them out at the edge of the long front verandah, and Wang the cook came padding out to get their luggage. Wang bobbed his head, grinning, but said nothing to his new mistresses. Pike watched them go into the house behind the cook, looking about curiously, and this time not displeased.

Suddenly Pike knew he wanted them to stay for reasons other than preserving his job of carrying on for Cash. He had never felt so good in his life, yet he had no idea which of the two girls had made him feel that way. Either one was plenty capable of doing so.

HE HAD fixed himself a bunk in the little office building that stood across the yard from the house. When he had taken care of the horses and backed the buckboard in under the shed, he went there. Dropping into the chair at the scarred old desk, he pulled out the makings and rolled himself a cigarette. He was face to face with his real problem now—what he was going to do about Pres Waters and the rough sporting element backing him in Long Branch and Flat Rock.

It wasn't a problem that could be solved by bracing the man and killing him; there were too many others ready to take his place. Pike had reached no decision by the time the first punchers began to come in from the day's work on the range. Half Moon had a big payroll, since it ran around twenty thousand head of stock, but only a part of the crew lived at headquarters. The others occupied the half-dozen line camps scattered over the range. There was a secondary steer ranch east in the Chucas. Half Moon had the country's top range boss in Bert Foreman, Fred's brother.

Pike changed into range clothes again, considerably relieved to get out of the hot, binding town suit. Pretty soon Big Brown, who cooked for the crew, began to beat the triangle hanging outside the cookshack door to announce supper.

Pike was about to join the stampede to the tables when Bert Foreman appeared outside the office door. He saw at a glance that Bert looked agitated. A tall, lean man, Bert's hair was gray at the temples, and his eyes showed the fanning wrinkles of a man long used to staring into great distance outdoors.

"There's a dead man coming in," Bert said.

"Dead? Who?"

"Chunk Hodges from the steer ranch. Somebody ambushed him, Pike. That's all I know about it yet."

Pike felt as if hornets had somehow man-

aged to build a nest in his stomach. "Have the boys come in behind the barns, Bert. Don't let the ladies see Chunk!" Then suddenly he knew that was all wrong. "No. Let the men come across the yard, the way they were going to."

"I was at East Camp when Froggy and Arp came in," Bert was saying. "They found Chunk still warm, and the ambusher shot from that lava bench west of the steer ranch horse pasture. The men trailed him a ways, but he'd had a big start."

"Which way'd he head?"

"West, then started circling south."

"Toward Long Branch."

"A man," said Bert, "could come to that conclusion."

Bert had not yet spread the word in the cookhouse, but somehow it was telegraphed there. Every man had left his place and was outside when the two riders came slowly over the ridge to the east, leading a horse. Something was tied on the led horse, something that very recently had been Chunk Hodges. The grim little procession came into the ranchyard. Pike saw first Letty and then Hester emerge onto the porch.

"Put him in the empty bunkhouse, boys," Pike said. "Did anybody go for the sheriff, Bert?"

"Yeah. He ought to be here by morning."

The girls did not come into the yard until the procession had gone on around the end of the farthest bunkhouse. Letty led the way, Hester coming uncertainly after. They both looked frightened and sick.

"What happened?" Letty asked.

"One of our boys at the steer ranch was bushwhacked."

"But why?" she cried. "You said Uncle Cash was murdered, and now—"

Roughly Pike said, "You two come on into the office. I reckon it's time I laid it on the line."

They followed him into the little cubicle from which Cash had ruled his empire for so long. He directed them to the two straight-backed chairs along the wall, then sat down behind the desk.

"It's time we found out," he said, "if you rated all the affection Cash gave you. Chunk Hodges was a damned good man, and now he's dead, shot from hiding. You also heard some shooting in town last night. I did part of it. A man would have cut me in two with a scattergun if I hadn't been lucky enough to kill him first. The whole idea is to put you in charge of the Canfield holdings and scare you so badly you'll sell out cheap—at least the town property. Pres Waters is leading the scheme, and he has tough backing. I know that much. What I don't know is, how easily do you two scare?"

"Easily," said Letty. "I don't like your control over our affairs, but I don't want you shot out of our way, either. So there's only one thing to do. We'll go back East, and the estate can go to charity, where nobody can fight over it."

"No!" Pike shouted. "I don't know what kind of man your father was, but he sure didn't pass any of Cash's fight on to you. You have to stand up to it, and we have to fight!"

"I don't feel at liberty," Letty said, "to make my fights with other people's lives."

Hester's chin had come up, her slender shoulders had pulled back. She said, "Letty, I'm not going to take the train for home the first time I see a dead man. Before we came out here you were thrilled to death. Life on a cattle ranch—the beautiful scenery—the bracing air—the freedom! What a heaven it was going to be. Now you've found out there are a few bugs in our heaven, and you want to quit. I don't. I'm ready to do whatever Pike says in order to hold onto my half."

Pike was staring at the fair-haired sister, amazed at the spunk behind her apparent timidity. If Hester held on it would keep the estate intact, with him running it. She must know that.

"Well, you've just set yourself up a few more corpses," Letty said. She turned and went out.

Pike said, "Thanks, Miss Hester."

"Don't call me 'Miss,' Pike; I don't like it. And I don't understand Letty. She's never been so easily frightened before."

"She doesn't like me."

"She hasn't given herself a chance to find out whether she does. It's something else, and I wish I knew what."

There was one shot, and Pike's horse leaped forward and then fell.

SHERIFF INSKEEP reached Half Moon shortly after daylight. Pike and Bert Foreman rode out with him toward the steer ranch in the Chucas. As they rode, Inskeep asked a few questions. Had Chunk had any enemies, or rowed with anybody lately, or was there anything in his past that might have led to his murder?

Impatiently, Pike said, "Sheriff, the killer could have shot anybody else on Half Moon, and it'd have suited whoever hired him just as well. All this goes back to Cash. I never did agree with your idea that he was cut down by somebody carrying a grudge from the past."

"Maybe I'm not so satisfied with that notion myself, seeing what happened to Chunk," Inskeep answered. "But when you can't get past guesswork, you might as well make your guess sound sensible. I told you before that I can't lock a man up on your suspicions, Pike. And I haven't found any evidence that Pres Waters or anybody in his crowd had a hand in killing Cash. Let's see if we find any evidence on this trip."

They picked up sign at the lava butte west of the steer ranch, not only of the killer but of the two Half Moon punchers who had followed it for a while the day before. They came to the place where the previous trackers gave it up, then pressed on. The killer's trail had by then turned directly south, in the general direction of Long Branch.

But a little later the riders received a surprise. An attempt had been made to foul the trail; the killer had put his horse into Strawberry Creek for a long distance. When he emerged, it was on the same side of the stream that he had entered. Afterward he had struck out, riding swiftly and heading east.

"He made it look as if he were going to Long Branch, but he really headed for Flat Rock," Pike said in rising excitement. "Sheriff, let's follow the trail on in."

"We sure will," Inskeep said.

The sign ran boldly thereafter, the killer apparently assured he had thrown pursuit off his trail. The rough old town of Flat Rock, the first in Skull Basin, lay some ten miles farther east. The sheriff and the two Half Moon men raised the speed of their horses. Two hours later the sign carried them onto Flat Rock's main street, where it was lost in the tracked dust. Yet they went on, reining up in front of the Crystal Palace Saloon, where Pres Waters hung out when he was in this town.

Although it was early in the forenoon, the saloon was open. When the sheriff stepped in, with the Half Moon riders behind him, four men at a table down at the end stiffened in sudden wary attention. Pike felt his blood course faster when he saw in the group the tense face of Pres Waters.

Inskeep strode up to them, his spurs rattling. "You're up and out kind of early for a man in your trade, aren't you, Waters?" he greeted.

Waters was a heavy-set man with gray sideburns that merged into oily black hair. There was a glittering animosity in the glance he slid to Pike, and his gambler's face did not quite conceal his uneasiness. He must be remembering his fight with Pike, and the frustrated attempt to square things with a shotgun afterward. Maybe that was why he had come here—to get protection around him.

When Waters said nothing, Inskeep turned his gaze to the big, roughly dressed individual at the table with Waters and two Flat Rock tinhorns. The big man wore the marks of the outdoors, had a stubble of whiskers on his cheeks, and a visible uneasiness in his deep-set eyes. Nobody had seen Cash's killer close up, Pike remembered; they could report only that he had been a big man.

Maybe Inskeep was thinking along those line, too, for he said, "Don't recollect seeing you around here before. Where do you hail from, stranger?"

"Here and there," the man said insolently.

Waters gave him a scowl, as if warning him not to invite trouble. Then, with a shrug, Waters said, "He calls himself Turk Zabo, Sheriff. He's just passing through."

"That right?" Inskeep asked.

"You heard what he said," Zabo returned. "Why so much interest, anyhow? If you have a warrant for my arrest I sure don't know what for."

"I just make it my business to keep posted," Inskeep said, and he turned away.

They had a drink at the bar, then emerged onto the dirty, unwashed street. Before they swung up to leather, Pike said, "Maybe the horse tracks didn't lead right to that table, Sheriff, but there was your killer and the men that hired him."

"I have that feeling, too," Inskeep said. "And from what you tell me, you're on the same list. Maybe you're next. Unless you boys have an errand in Long Branch, you might as well go back to the spread. Have the boys bring Chunk to town, and you'd better all be there for the inquest in the morning."

"What are you going to do about Zabo?" Bert asked.

"What can I do till I get something on him? I wish some of you impatient young buggers had to tote this star for a while. You'd soon know it's more of a job than pointing your finger and saying, 'You're it.' "

Riding back to Half Moon, Pike felt worn out from his growing sense of futility. Bert split off short of headquarters to ride over to East Camp. Pike went on, alone with his awareness that disaster would strike again before Inskeep could find grounds for moving openly against the Flat Rock combine.

THE coroner's inquest over Chunk Hodges, the next day, resulted in a verdict of murder by a person or persons unknown. Poke went to Long Branch with

his riders because he couldn't stay away. It was a sobered crew that headed back to the ranch afterward. They all knew that the latest killing had been meant as a warning to Pike and the Canfield girls. If it were ignored, a second warning would come, with results equally appalling, and nobody could guess where the next blow would fall.

A reign of terror, that no one acknowledged and of which no one spoke, was on already. Quietly, the next morning, Pike issued orders that thereafter no rider would go onto the range unarmed, and in certain vicinities they would ride in pairs. He got word to all the outlying camps, as well as to the steer ranch.

Yet still the tension built up. Men cleaned and oiled guns over and over again; they took to stopping their horses on the range and looking carefuly all about, and they grew quarrelsome. One night there was a brawl in the bunkhouse that must have been heard by the Canfield girls, who seemed content to spend their days indoors. Two men asked for their time and rode out. Wang took to burning some weird incense, which probably didn't help the girls' nerves a bit.

The work had to go on. From mid-April until late fall a cattle operation was continuous, and heavy in proportion to its size. Spring roundup was over, but now there was hay to cut in the bottoms, missed calves to find and brand, the vast herds to salt and shuffle about, stray horses and steers to be located and brought in. So the work did go on; Pike saw to it, growing sterner and tougher each day. He felt as if he had aged ten years in the week since the killing of Chunk Hodges.

Then, one morning as he was saddling a horse to ride to West Camp, he looked up and saw Hester coming across the ranchyard. She wore a blouse and a whipcord skirt, and her yellow hair was coiled fetchingly about her head.

"Is there any reason why I can't take a ride with you?" she asked.

"One. We don't have any sidesaddles. I'll buy a couple when—"

"When the trouble's over? I don't intend to stay cooped up that long. It's too much like hiding."

"We don't have any side saddle," Pike repeated.

"Then I'll ride a man's. This skirt's divided—or didn't you notice?"

He hadn't, and his cheeks colored as he took a look, but she didn't seem to object to his discovery that she had nice flat thighs and small, booted feet. He was about to send her back indoors, anyhow, but then thought better of it. The range between here and the western line was open, and there wasn't too much danger.

"Got a hat?" he asked.

"I don't need one. I want to get a nice squint like Bert Foreman's."

Pike roped out a gentle nag, threw on a saddle, and shortened the stirrups. Hester went up with a lithe ease that surprised him, and he found he had to let the stirrups out a little. Silently he swung onto his own horse, and they rode out with the morning sun bright and hot on their backs. He was having impossible feelings, considering the trouble they were all in, and this time he knew they were aroused by Hester.

They reached West Camp and nooned there with the two punchers holding it down. Hester took a real interest in things and asked remarkably intelligent questions. Just before they got back to headquarters in midafternoon, Pike said, "Does your sister still want to throw it up and go home?"

"Well, I haven't been able to get her out of the house. So finally I had to come alone."

Pike wished she dared to do it more often, but he didn't say so. But she didn't come out in the days that followed. Letty remained withdrawn in the big house, and how she stood it was more than he knew. But she seemed resolved not to give herself to this new situation so strange to her, so frightening. And the blond sister seemed to have crawled back under the dark one's thumb.

It was on a Sunday evening that Pike finally worked up the courage to invite himself over to the ranchhouse. Hester came to the door and, when she saw who it was, stepped back with a pleased smile, inviting him in. He had lived in the main house in Cash's day, but, as he stepped in, it seemed strange to him. He realized that this feeling came from the fact that the furniture had been

rearranged and a lot of fooferaw Cash would have pitched out had appeared from somewhere and was now on display. Just the same, it looked mighty nice—homey and pleasant.

Letty was seated in Cash's old barrel chair, absorbed in some kind of needlework. He had a sudden wonder as to what it would be like seeing her there with her needles clacking away, knitting some man—even him—a pair of sox. Or seeing Hester doing it. That was the queer thing about it. They both fit the picture here, both pleased a man mightily.

"Don't you ever get tired of sitting on your hind end?" he asked.

Letty's mouth flew open, and he saw the quick rise of her breast.

"That's what I keep asking," said Hester, "though never so aptly."

"Is there something you'd like me to do?" Letty asked politely.

"You might start learning some of the ropes you're so anxious to get into your own hands. Or let Hester learn. She did well the one time she went out on the range with me."

"I know," said Letty. "A beef critter's a steer no matter of what sex, and you have to keep scrub bulls out of the herd or else, and a slickear's the property of any man who can slap an iron on it. That's something else she keeps telling me."

"That's not all," Hester said. "A grade is a critter whose blood line has been built up from the native stock."

AT THAT precise second it happened. Pike heard the sharp, vicious spat of a rifle and, simultaneously, the crash of window glass. He saw the big front window of the room disintegrate, as he sprang forward and blew out the lamp near Letty. In its last dying light he saw that both terrified girls were unhurt. Then he was lunging for the door.

The shot had emptied the bunkhouse. Most of the men were racing around the big house, bent on settling matters with whomever had dared to fire upon the girls. But Pike headed straight for the office to catch up his shell belt, six-shooter, and rifle from the rack of firearms kept there. Afterward he went pounding toward the corral. By the time he reached it three or four men were there, roping out mounts. Pike grabbed the first one that was saddled. He had by then lost four or five minutes the killer would have used getting away.

"Get your shooting irons and follow me!" he yelled. Then he thundered out across the ranchyard.

He wasted no time investigating the point of vantage from which the killer had shot into the house. He was certain of the direction the man would take getting away, and he had fast Half Moon horseflesh under him. He sloped the animal out, driving eastward across the flat. Topping the first rise, he saw in the far distance the dim shape of a racing horse. He drove in the spurs.

A little later he knew that several of his men were coming after him while, ahead, the killer rode for his life. In the back of his hotly raging mind, Pike puzzled over whether that shot had been meant to kill him or only to generate more terror in the sisters. That didn't matter much. Things had gone far enough already, and he meant to settle them if possible.

The killer lost no time trying to throw Pike off the trail. Instead he rode steadily, frantically, toward his closest refuge—Flat Rock and the tough confederates he had there. Mile after mile fell behind, during which the man managed to keep ahead.

Presently, when Pike knew beyond question that the fellow was making for Flat Rock, he pulled down to wait for the other Half Moon riders to catch up. In a few minutes they had thundered up to him—three men, with Bert Foreman in the lead.

"You boys ready to go into Flat Rock with me after him?" Pike asked.

"We should have done it sooner," Bert answered, and the others agreed.

That was Pike's own opinion. All at once time had been rolled back twenty years, to the lawless conditions prevailing when Cash had begun to tame the country. There was no time to wait on Inskeep and the processes of the law, for before anything could be accomplished that way somebody else might die. So it had to be done the old way. They had to go into Flat Rock and get their man, and anybody else who tried to side him.

It was an extremely hazardous undertaking, for Half Moon had always been hated heartily in Flat Rock. Yet the four men headed that way at once, the desert starlight bright upon them, but riding openly because they had to reach the place before the killer had aroused it and gotten it prepared for a fight.

On the edge of Flat Rock, Pike pulled down his horse. Quietly he said, "We'll go right in and see who we find in the saloon. If we can catch one of the buggers Bert and I saw with Pres Waters the last time, we'll take him. That ought to bring his cronies out into the open. Come on."

The town from the end of the main street seemed harmlessly quiet. The stores were closed, and the only light showed in the hotel and in the Crystal Palace Saloon farther down the street. The Half Moon riders kept boldly on. They were abreast of the hotel when all hell broke loose upon them.

Gunfire opened on both sides of the street. Pike realized too late that they had been drawn cleverly into a trap. Maybe that had been the whole purpose of firing on the Canfield house—to get him and some of his men to come here in pursuit. Pike didn't have to issue any orders. The shooting came from the rooftops and buildings on both sides. Somebody should have been hurt in that first withering blast, but nobody had left his saddle. Maybe the confusion and haste had saved them. The horses went driving on deeper into the town, the riders returning the fire with furious energy.

All four horses streaked around the next corner, but by then they were trapped in the town. A cliff cut off escape by means of the end of that street, and there was nothing left but an alleyway, which doubtless was being watched, running under the cliff.

Pike swung from the saddle, jerked the rifle from its boot, tossed the reins to Bert Foreman. "Get riding," he whispered. "They'll figure they shot somebody loose from his horse."

"What are you going to do?" Bert answered.

"Go, damn it! Get out of here! But wait for me just outside of town."

"You'll never come through alive."

"Ride!"

Bert didn't like it, but he was the kind who obeyed orders. He led the way, and Half Moon went crashing up the alley. Ahead, a streak of fire winked in the night, but Half Moon responded with a blast of sixguns, and got through. Pike had stepped into the cover of the alley brush. When he heard the drum of hoofs on the desert, he grinned to himself.

He knew that his chances of leaving this town were next to nil, but he considered that only for a second. He was figuring on the Flat Rock gunmen's pouring out onto the main street now to see what had become of the fallen rider. A moment later he heard them shouting back and forth to each other.

PIKE began to slip through the brush, working down the alley. He had been in this town enough times to know its layout. He meant to get into the Crystal Palace by way of the back door before they grew suspicious about the Half Moon man who had not ridden out of town with the others.

He saw an open rear door that showed reflected light. As he slipped up to it he could feel the skin of his neck grow tight. He halted where the brush gave out, and for a few breaths he studied the area ahead. Then, pressing close to the building's back wall, he slid forward to the door.

A dead man lay there, apparently one of those who had challenged the escape of the other Half Moon riders. Pike stepped over him and went on. There was no talking in the saloon. As Pike crossed the back room, he cocked the rifle and lifted it to ready at his hip. The door ahead also stood ajar, but he came up to it slowly and carefully. Then he could see into the main room, which seemed empty at the moment.

He was slow and easy about moving out where he could see the whole area. The place was entirely deserted. Glancing hastily about, he saw the open door of the saloon's office. He pushed across to it and stepped into the small space. A moment later he heard somebody come in through the batwings.

"Damn it," a man bawled, "that cuss has to be around here somewhere!"

"He probably crawled under a building to die," another man answered. "Quit worrying, Turk. The boys'll find him."

"You'd worry, too, if you'd stuck your neck out shooting up Half Moon."

Pike's lips pulled tight over his teeth. He had hoped to get more of them, but this Turk Zabo was the key figure, their special killer. Now, before the saloon filled up, was his best chance at the man.

He stepped out through the office doorway, the rifle ready for business. He moved so quietly that the two men who had entered did not hear him. One was Zabo, the other was a stranger. They had stopped at the bar and were filling glasses from the house bottle that stood there.

"I'll kill the first man that moves," Pike threatened in a low voice.

Zabo held his body still, but slowly turned his head to stare at Pike, who stood some twenty feet away.

"Get your hands up," Pike said. "Then come toward me, both of you."

Rage and apprehension tightened Zabo's face, and he held back till after the other man, astonished and frightened, began to obey. Then Zabo followed suit.

"Keep moving toward that back door," Pike added. "When you get to the alley, turn right. A peep or a funny move from either one of you means a dead man sure."

"What's the idea?" Zabo demanded.

"Did you forget you just admitted to shooting up Half Moon?" Pike asked.

He followed them as the two moved into the back hall, then along its length to the outside door. Pike could hear his heart slamming as they took the last few steps, because he had to take a chance on somebody's being out there investigating the alley. But his two men moved out without causing excitement, and he had to follow close behind to prevent their turning on him or making a break to get away from under his gun.

A moment later they were moving along under the cliff. The main street was quiet, but Pike knew that most of the town was searching it, still figuring that the wounded man had been hit in that first vicious ambush. Yet he hardly drew a breath until they were on the edge of Flat Rock and moving into the desert.

He knew about where his men would wait, and kept his prisoners walking steadily in that direction. The town fell behind. Then, ahead, he saw horsemen coming quietly toward him. In a moment they met.

"I'll be damned!" Bert breathed. "You got their war chief!"

"For the time being," Pike said. "I don't know who the other man is, but if he isn't in as deep as Zabo, he'll talk to Inskeep to save himself. We'll put 'em on my horse and I'll ride behind you, Bert."

Zabo went up, taking the saddle and letting the other man crawl up behind him. With the three Half Moon men covering the prisoners, Pike walked in close enough to take their six-guns. Then he swung up behind Bert, and the little party headed quietly into the deeper desert, pointing toward Half Moon.

It was sometime after midnight when they reached headquarters. Turning the prisoners over to Bert, Pike slid down from behind the ramrod and walked toward the big house, which still showed light. He heard the excitement at the bunkhouse as the men there realized what was happening. Then he knocked on the ranchhouse door.

This time it was Letty who responded. He could see the tight erectness of her slender figure by the reflected light from the main room. He walked past her. Letty followed him wordlessly, and he saw Hester, strangely quiet, in the main room. Glass from the shattered window glittered on the carpet.

"We got the cuss," Pike said to relieve their worry. But that was all he explained. "You'd better go to bed now and get some rest."

"Rest?" Letty cried, and she pointed to a bullet hole in the back wall. "Do you realize that couldn't have missed Hester by more than a few inches? They'll keep killing, and nothing's worth that, Pike!"

REALIZING that she was in the grip of hysteria, Pike looked toward the kitchen door. "Wang!" he shouted. "Do we have any tea? The lady needs a good strong bracer."

When he looked again at Letty, he saw color rushing back into the whiteness of her cheeks. "So you think I'm a weakling!" she blazed. "But if they'd killed Hester, I'd never have forgiven myself for staying here—or you for insisting on it!"

For the first time he understood that, at least for the present, Letty's fear was for her sister. He said, "You'll always be scared till you learn there are things a lot worse than dying, Letty. Running from trouble is one. Being scared gutless for somebody we love is another."

Letty's features relaxed a little. He guessed suddenly that he must have rubbed her the wrong way from the start, keeping her hostile toward him and thus toward the ranch and his whole way of life. In that moment she was strongly appealing to him, a worried, bewildered girl caught in fearful circumstances and seemingly without a friend other than Hester.

"Was there any fighting?" Letty asked.

"A little," Pike admitted. "But it was fast and confused, and nobody on our side got hurt. We took two prisoners I figure on delivering to the sheriff. Maybe we can't prove anything, but I'm hoping one man'll talk to save his own neck. Anyway, it'll keep their fancy killer out of action for a while."

"They'll find a new one," Letty retorted.

"Probably so. And if you still want to head East, I won't try to talk you out of it again."

He knew Hester also was waiting for Letty's answer. But the dark sister said nothing more.

When he went back outdoors, Pike learned that two men had mounted guard on the house after the shooting. Even with Zabo in custody, he felt it wise to leave the guards there as long as the prisoners were on the ranch. Zabo and the other man, who gave his name as Elvie, were locked in an old adobe storehouse that had no windows. Another guard was placed there, outside the door. Then Pike and those who had been with him on the long hard ride to Flat Rock turned in.

Pike was up early the next morning, wanting to start for Long Branch with the prisoners as quickly as possible, since they were a continuing invitation to trouble here at headquarters. He had just finished dressing when he glanced out the office window and saw Letty coming across the yard. He opened the door to let her in. She looked strained and unrested.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"I wanted to talk to you. What you said last night, about fear for those you love being cowardly, is right."

At that moment somebody yelled sharply out across the ranchyard.

"Just a minute," Pike said, and he went outside.

The door to the building where the prisoners had been held stood open, but the guard was still outside, his pistol drawn. As Pike rushed up, Bert Foreman stepped out of the adobe, his face twisted in black anger.

"Did they get loose?" Pike gasped.

Bert shook his head. "No. Come take a look."

Pike stepped into the adobe behind Bert. Some old mattresses had been brought in for the prisoners to sleep on. Turk Zabo was stretched out on one, his head propped on an elbow, and he had a half-amused grin on his face as he stared up at Pike. The man Elvie lay on the other mattress. He wasn't moving at all, just staring up toward the ceiling with fixed, unblinking eyes.

"Is he dead?" Pike gasped.

"As a mackeral," Bert said harshly.

"He must have had a heart attack," said Zabo. "I didn't know a thing about it till I woke up a while ago."

"You sidewinder!" Bert blazed. "You smothered him with something, maybe your shirt."

Except for a blueness of face that Pike could now recognize, there were no marks of violence on Elvie, no sign of struggle about. Yet he was a slight man, where Zabo was big and muscular, and the mockery in Zabo's face confirmed what Bert had charged.

Outside again, Bert said, "This is a hell of a note. If Zabo was that scared of him, we must have been close to finding out something. There's not even much use taking Zabo in, now. Inskeep won't get a thing out of him, and you're the only one who heard him admit he shot up the house last night."

Pike cursed himself silently. His big mistake had been in not separating the prisoners. But he had never dreamed Zabo would attempt anything as completely cold-blooded as this murder.

"We'll take Zabo in," he grated. "They'll at least have to hunt up a new gunman, or lay off till the grand jury turns Zabo loose."

"That's all they can do, Pike. We ought to string him up ourselves."

"None of that."

They made the long trip to Long Branch that forenoon, Pike taking three men with him to help guard the insolent, unconcerned prisoner. They brought the dead man in too. Pike swore out a warrant, and Zabo was officially booked into jail.

"I'll hold onto him as long as possible," Inskeep said.

"I'm going to see Ralph Peeples," Pike said, "and tell him to do anything the law allows to keep Zabo behind bars. You get on the telegraph and see if you can't locate a sheriff who wants Zabo for something really serious. That might make him change his attitude."

THE lawyer was in his office over the bank. He was grave as he seated Pike across the desk from him, then listened to the latest developments.

"How're the ladies taking it?" Peeples asked.

"Well, I don't like it myself," Pike answered, "and they're a couple of women. They haven't packed up yet, but let a few more shots be whammed their way or let somebody else get butchered, and they're apt to. At least Letty will." Then he thought of something that had been in the back of his mind, but which he had never asked about. "Peeples, who gets all that property if they forfeit it?"

"There's a long list of dispositions. But the estate would have to be liquidated. I told you that."

"Broken up and sold, you mean."

"That's right."

Pike nodded. "And no matter who bought what, the Canfield hold on the town basin would be gone."

"That's right, too. So would your job."

"I don't give a damn about the job. But I do care about what Cash worked for all his life."

Peeples's hard eyes smiled a little. "Take it easy. I didn't mean any offense."

Since it was the first time he had been in town in a couple of weeks, Pike went over to the bank. Harley Davison, the manager, kept the books and handled the receipts and disbursements of all the Canfield properties in Long Branch. He reported that everything was in order. Afterward Pike dropped in on all the establishments just to let them know he was keeping an eye on things himself. Everything seemed to be going along all right.

It was supper time when Pike and his men rode into Half Moon headquarters again. Pike washed up and had his supper, then went to the office. He remembered that Letty had come over to see him the first thing that morning to discuss something with him. Yet, although she must have known he was back and in the office again, she did not come across the ranchyard. It puzzled him, but then he had never understood her. So he decided not to go over and ask what had been on her mind.

Work pressed. Pike hadn't visited North Camp in over a week. After the next morning's breakfast he was in the saddle, heading out. The capture and jailing of Turk Zabo had done nothing to ease the tensions either in his men or in himself. He felt them as he rode north that morning, and his mind kept raking over the situation in a restless search for a way to end the trouble permanently.

Affairs at the upper end were in order. Pike kept two riders there, branding mavericks that had slipped through calf roundup untouched, salting the cattle in that region, and riding line. Yet word of the trouble had come here, as it was everywhere on Half Moon, and there was no jollity. When he had checked on things there, Pike headed back to headquarters.

He had dropped down off the mesa that ran for miles to the north, and was descending the cactus-studded bajada, when he saw his horse twitch its ears and swing its head slightly toward the low rim that ran in under the adjoining butte. He cast his own glance that way but saw nothing but the rocks and the pure blue of the sky beyond. Then the crash of a rifle shot split the atmosphere.

His horse leaped forward, and Pike had all he could do to scramble out of the saddle as the beast went down. There was that one shot and no more. Free of the stirrups, Pike lay on his side for a second, while he desperately searched the line of the rim top. It was entirely empty. Then he scrambled over onto

his knees, jerking out his Colt .45. He made a running crawl to the closest rock laying at the base of the bajada.

There was no more shooting, and he didn't understand why, for he could have been killed easily by the poorest marksman with an advantage like the rifleman had. Pike moved on up the slope, reckless of more shooting. Then all at once he heard the clatter of hoofs ring out. The ambusher must have been scared off when he saw he had missed his mark.

Pursuit was impossible. Rising groggily, Pike walked back down to the horse. It was threshing, mortally shot through the chest. He had no choice but to use the sixgun now, pressing it to the suffering horse's ear and pulling the trigger. The twitching stopped.

Pike was still some five miles from headquarters, with no choice but to walk in on legs still wobbly and weak. He could not understand why he was still alive. Not wanting to carry the saddle all that distance, he left it to be picked up later, and started out across the baking desert flat.

A mile out from headquarters he came upon Bert Foreman. The range boss was riding in from the steer ranch and had seen the walking man in the distance. When Bert rode up there was a worried look on his sun-browned features.

"More of the same?" he asked.

"More. I reckon it was to help Zabo. Somebody set out to show Inskeep that he doesn't have the killer yet."

"It was only a matter of time, anyhow," Bert said with a sigh, "till they have to turn Zabo loose. You're lucky you came through it alive."

"That's what I can't understand, Bert. The man had a rifle, and I was close enough so he could have drilled me. Why didn't he do it? I always figured my time was coming. If I go, the girls get the ranch, and they're already pretty much of a mind to sell the works. Yet that reptile on the rim passed his chance. That's about got me beat."

"Well, swing up and ride in," Bert said.

WHEN they reached the Half Moon ranch yard, Wang was standing outside looking excited. He waved both arms as he came bounding toward them.

"What's the matter, Wang?" Pike called, dismounting hastily.

"Missee Letty—Missee Hester—they go town—catch tlain," Wang chattered. "They say goodbye, Wang, nice boy. They long time gone."

"No!" Pike gasped.

The girls didn't know a thing about what had just happened to Pike, but last night another man had died on Half Moon, smothered brutally. That must have been the last straw with both of them.

"How long ago, Wang?" he asked.

"Light after bleakfast. Leave note." Wang fished into his cotton jumper and brought out a paper, which he held forth.

Pike's fingers trembled as he unfolded the note. There were two of them, actually. He read first the one, in ink, which showed the flowing hand of a woman.

> "I don't want you to think I'm too much of a coward, Pike, but we can't take the responsibility for all this killing. After what happened last night, Hester agrees with me. We're going home. Thanks, Pike. We wish it could have been otherwise. I'm leaving a note I almost showed you yesterday. I found it under my door the first morning we were in Long Branch."

The other message was on brown wrapping paper and had been printed with a pencil.

> "Letitia Canfield: You're not wanted here, and if you stay you won't like what's going to happen to your sister and everything else that will be your fault. A friend."

Pike stood there for a long moment with his eyes blurring. So that was what had put the fear in Letty—and who could blame her? She had decided to ignore the warning, showing plenty of courage. She couldn't even have shown the threat to Hester, whose attitude had been so different. Then the killing had started, and the last one had simply been too much. Maybe she had shown Hester the warning then, to persuade the fair sister to go with her. Anyway they were gone, and it was the end of everything.

Looking up at the quiet but curious Bert, Pike said, "Well, they've gone back East. They're letting Waters and his outfit rake in the chips rather than have more people die."

Bert looked at the sun and said, "They

probably just had time to make the eastbound passenger train."

Pike walked blindly to the ranch office and went inside. Limp and spent, he sat in the chair at the desk and closed his eyes. They were gone, and now he could only respect their reason, and know that the loss of them was greater to him than the loss of Half Moon and everything else. Hester with the golden hair and surprising courage—he loved her. Letty, fiery and wilful and with an even greater courage—damned if he didn't love her, too.

Suddenly he was on his feet and heading for the day corral. Bert was offsaddling the mount he had just brought in. He said nothing when Pike took a catch-rope and stepped into the enclosure to snake out a fresh mount. He helped Pike saddle.

"Going after 'em?" he asked.

"If I have to, to the Missouri," Pike said.

He rode a beeline for town and made the ride to Long Branch in an hour less than any other man had ever ridden it. He went thumping into Inskeep's office and was lucky enough to find the sheriff at his desk.

He told Inskeep what had happened, ending, "There's only one way to stop 'em now, Sheriff. You have to do it."

"I might be able to if I knew what you're driving at."

"Send an arrest-and-hold wire to the sheriff at Silver Bow."

"Are you crazy?" Inskeep demanded.

"I will be if you don't send that wire. The train hasn't hit Silver Bow yet. Come on."

Inskeep stared a second longer. Then his jaw clamped and he shoved out of his chair. They went at once to the depot, where the sheriff wrote out a message on a yellow pad. He slid it around for Pike to read.

"Sheriff, Silver Bow: Letty and Hester Canfield on Train No. 14 wanted here badly stop arrest, hold and advise. Inskeep, Long Branch."

"That all right?" the sheriff asked.

"File it," Pike said.

Inskeep swallowed just once, then slid the telegram across to the telegrapher.

"Those two pretty girls that got on 14?" the man said in surprise. "What'd they do?"

"Absconded," Inskeep spat.

Walking back up the long street with the sheriff, Pike felt excitement running in him. There was no chance now that the sisters could get past Silver Bow, although they might never forgive him for the way they'd be stopped. So he was thinking again of the horse that had been shot from under him, and that he hadn't been killed, when he had always supposed his enemies were only waiting for a good chance to do it.

THEY didn't want him killed, and that was where he had been mistaken all along. They had worked to frighten the sisters into forfeiting their inheritance to stop the bloodshed. That would break the Canfield grip on Long Branch and Skull Basin, and would let the vicious element assume control again.

But who had known enough about the Canfield sisters to slide that note under Letty's door instead of Hester's, to address it to her personally? Moreover, Pike remembered, the note had been addressed with her full name, Letitia. The names appeared in the will, which Peeples thought somebody had broken into his office to read. But that document certainly hadn't stated that Letty was the one who decided matters for the sisters.

At first he himself was the only one Pike could think of who knew the girls well enough to realize that Letty had been the dominating sister. Yet there was someone else. Ralph Peeples had spent considerable time with them during their first evening in Long Branch, explaining the will.

The sheriff said something and turned off at the courthouse steps, but Pike hardly heard him. Almost afraid to follow the chain of his thoughts, he knew he was going to have another little talk with the lawyer.

Again he found Peeples in his office over the bank. The blackness of his mood must have registered on his face, for the lawyer straightened in his chair when he saw who had walked in, and put down the pen he had been using.

"Peeples," Pike said, "I want to see Cash Canfield's will."

The scowl on Peeples's hard face darkened. "You can't," he said. "It's being put through

probate. Anyhow, why should you? I told you all it says pertaining to you, and a lot more."

"But not enough," Pike said. "One thing I intend to know right now is who'd liquidate the estate if the Canfields forfeited it?"

"I don't see where that's any of your business."

"Peeples, you look tough and maybe you are, but I'm tougher. I aim to have that question answered, right now."

"All right," said Peeples. "In case of liquidation, I'd handle it."

"For a fee?"

"Naturally."

"How much? Might as well tell me, or I'll go to the courthouse and dig the answer out there."

"Ten per cent of the gross," Peeples said grudgingly.

"Which is a hell of a lot more than you ever made out of the property, or would again if I run it or the sisters come into possession. On top of that, you could liquidate it to anybody you chose. That's how Pres Waters and the Flat Rock men cut in on the deal. Peeples, you're not only in on it, you started it."

Ralph Peeples put the palms of his hands on the desk and started to lift himself up. Then he slumped back in the chair, staring at Pike in a deadly way.

"That's dangerous talk, Pike," he said. "I'd advise you not to repeat it, because you've nothing to base it on."

"Then who slid this under Letty's door at the hotel?" Pike said, and withdrew the piece of brown paper from his pocket. "Nobody but you and I would know she was the one to threaten because she's the one with the say. And I know I didn't write it."

"Let's see that."

"Not much. I'm giving it to Inskeep."

"Pike, you're being foolish."

"Just smart, finally," Pike returned. "I know I can't prove anything yet, but this I know. You not only betrayed the trust Cash placed in you, you engineered his murder, at least agreed to it. I'm going to square that, and there's no use threatening me. You can't kill me without everything going to the sisters, in which case you wouldn't have any estate to liquidate and no ten per cent of a million dollars."

A bright, glittering recklessness began to show in the lawyer's eyes. "If I'm not mistaken," he said angrily, "the sisters took the eastbound train today."

"And are getting off at Silver Bow."

"What's that?" Peeples gasped, and for the first time looked really frightened.

The lawyer's expression confirmed all of Pike's suspicions. He swung on his heel and walked out.

Coming onto the sidewalk, he saw Inskeep rushing toward him. The sheriff made a motion of the hand, so, instead of crossing the street as he had intended, Pike went on toward the officer.

"I just thought of something, and I had to catch you before you left for the ranch," said Inskeep. "Come down to the office again. I'm going to deputize you."

"Me? What for?"

The officer grinned at him. "Arresting those girls was your idea. So you're the one who's going to fetch 'em back here, not me. You can catch No. 21 tonight."

"All right. I guess I have it coming."

Around four o'clock a wire came from the Silver Bow sheriff, saying the Canfields had been taken off No. 14 and were in his custody, waiting to be picked up. When he climbed the steps of the day coach of the next eastbound passenger train, Pike knew he had never faced a tougher undertaking. He had imposed on the sisters' personal liberty, and had subjected them to humiliation and embarrassment. They would never forget or forgive a bit of it. Just the same, he was not sorry.

The run across the desert to Silver Bow took nearly six hours, so it was midnight when Pike stepped down onto that town's tracks, feeling as if he were on his way to be hung. He had a deputy's star on his shirt, a requisition for the Canfield sisters in his pocket, and no bones at all in his legs. But he managed to walk to the courthouse. The sheriff, who had been advised of his coming, was waiting there for him.

"I'm going to be sued for false arrest," was his stern greeting.

"Where are they?"

"Locked up in the basement, where we keep women prisoners. Come on. I'm glad to turn 'em over to you."

STEPS from the hallway led down to the lower level. At the end of the next passage, Pike saw the barred door. When he came up to it with the Silver Bow officer, his face felt as stiff as rawhide. There were two cots in the small bare cell. Letty was lying on one, but Hester, seated on the other, made a small outcry and rushed to the door.

"Pike, thank heaven you came! There's been some horrible mistake."

"I doubt that." Letty lifted her head and stared his way, then got to her feet. She nodded when she saw the star on his shirt. "I *thought* you were behind that telegram."

"It was the only way to stop you," Pike said urgently. "You have to come back. That note you left, and some other things, opened my eyes. Ralph Peeples has been behind the trouble. He almost had everything in the bag."

"What I want right now," Letty said coolly, "is to get out of this place."

"Fine," said the Silver Bow sheriff. "And you heard what he said. He was the one who got you arrested. I was only doing what I had to do."

When the door was opened, the sisters came out of the cell as if it were on fire. They didn't slow down enough for Pike to catch up until they were on the street.

Then Letty said, "So you guessed it was Peeples."

"You figured so too?"

"I didn't trust him from the first. But that didn't make any difference. When more men started getting killed, and Hester almost got shot just because we stayed there, I couldn't stand it any longer. Don't blame Hester."

"I don't blame either one of you," Pike said. "But you're not responsible for the killing. Peeples is, and now we know who to fight—if you'll come back. Will you?"

"Yes," Hester said.

"All right," Letty agreed.

Since they had to wait for the next morning's westbound, Pike escorted the girls to a hotel and secured a room for them, then took one for himself. Stretched out in bed a little later, he thought over everything that had happened since the start of the trouble.

There was no question in his mind about Waters being in with Peeples. But all the gambler and his cronies wanted was a wide-open town in a wide-open cattle basin. Waters must have changed his mind about laying off Pike Keating that day when Pike stretched him out on the sidewalk. One fact was plain: the way things now stood, Waters would kill Pike Keating if possible, which was the last thing Peeples wanted to happen. Therein lay the big chance.

They stepped down from the westbound passenger onto Long Branch's station later the next forenoon. Pike took the Canfield girls to the Senator and put them up in the bridal suite again. But before leaving them he sat down for some earnest conversation.

"You have to go to Ralph Peeples," he said, "and act plenty riled about the way you were hauled off the train and brought back here."

"That won't be difficult," said Letty. "I'm still considerably outraged."

"The idea," Pike said, frowning, "is to make that man think you're still set on going East. Tell him you're homesick, you never liked it here, you hate me, and you'll be happy to settle for whatever provision Cash made in case you decided to sell out. You've got to make Peeples think he still has things set to his liking."

"And what will you be doing in the meantime?" Letty asked.

"It's time," Pike snapped, "that you learned to take orders without a lot of sassy questions."

"Right," said Hester. "We'll go see Peeples, and you keep your mouth shut, Letty. I'll do the talking."

In that moment Pike knew which of the two girls gave him the most wonderful feeling. Hester, with her faith and dedication, was the cream of the crop, and it didn't seem to matter that she was richer than he'd be in half a dozen lifetimes of punching cattle. She didn't give a hoot about the money value of Half Moon, maybe not even about Half Moon itself. But she was all out for Pike Keating, and didn't mind having him know it.

He left them, then, quite certain that Hester would be able to build up in Peeples the confident frame of mind Pike wanted him to have. From the Senator Pike went directly to Inskeep's office. He reported his brush with the lawyer.

"Peeples knew he'd need help, and he knew where to find it," he concluded. "But things jumped the track for him when I trimmed Waters's wick and the tinhorn set out to get me. That's why Peeples warned me to watch myself, making up that yarn about somebody breaking into his office to read the will. He really slipped when he wrote up Cash's will with no provision for who was to handle the property if I died. His caper was to scare the girls away so they'd forfeit the estate. But Waters's ends would be served just as well if I were killed, and he'd like it better."

"So?" said Inskeep.

"Is it all right if I stay deputized a while?"

"If you don't expect wages. My budget's thinner than restaurant soup. What do you figure to do?"

"Smoke Peeples into the open and make him fight it out."

"Through what kind of shenanigan?"

"If Hester convinces him they're set on going East, he'd get excited if he figured Waters was still out to kill me. He'd have to stop my murder, or the girls would have everything and he'd never get a fat commission from liquidating the estate. But I can't do anything till I know he took the bait. So you leave it up to me."

"I don't cotton to your making live bait of yourself," Inskeep reflected.

"Sheriff," Pike said earnestly, "I have to do this my own way. Cash believed in me, and now somebody else does. Don't you see?"

"No," said Inskeep, "but if the somebody else is one of those Canfield girls, I sure know how you feel."

PIKE waited, concealed in the bay of the courthouse door, until he saw the girls come down the steps from the bank's second story. Then he sauntered out and moved toward them. He had a scowl on his face, and they got the idea and returned it as they came together.

"It worked," Hester whispered.

"Fine. Now slap my face."

"Oh, no!"

"Peeples is watching out his window."

Hester let him have a good one across the jaw. Then the sisters marched on toward the hotel.

When he was not holding court, performing marriages, or pitching horseshoes, Justice Roberts conducted a veterinary practice. He was in what he called his chambers, a large office with one end partitioned off for privacy, when Pike found him.

"Judge," Pike said, "I want to swear out a warrant for Pres Waters."

"So do I," said Roberts. "I have for years. Say, what are you doing with that badge on your shirt?"

"Right now I'm getting a warrant to arrest Waters, and you're going to give it to me."

Roberts came forward in his chair. "If you have grounds, you'll get it."

"Suspicion of murder in the case of Cash Canfield, and trying to get me killed right here in Long Branch a while back."

"You got any kind of proof?"

"Give me the warrant and I'll get the proof."

"You're in business," the justice said.

He made out the paper, melted sealing wax on it, and set the seal of his office thereupon. But he was frowning when he gave it to Pike.

"Waters has moved over to Flat Rock," he said. "You'll have trouble taking him out of there with all those hardcases he has backing him."

"You let me handle the worrying, judge. But there's one more thing I wish you'd do—for my sake, and Cash's, and this town's. Give me a few minutes to get out of town. Then you mosey up to Peeples's office. Tell him you want to check on some point of law. But let it drop that I have a warrant for Waters and have gone to Flat Rock to bring him in."

Roberts frowned. "Peeples? What's that cold customer got to do with Waters?"

"I hope to prove," said Pike, "that he's had plenty. Will you do it?"

"For your sake and Cash's and my own satisfaction," Roberts said, "I will."

Pike got the horse he had put up at the Elephant Livery the day before and was soon on his way across the desert. He was still set in his convictions, but could not deny a little queasiness in the pit of his stomach. Peeples knew that Waters would not submit to arrest without a fight, which he would stand every chance to win conclusively in a place like

Flat Rock. The lawyer would waste no time getting over there to see that another murder did not occur.

After that—well, a man could only play out his string.

Pike struck the Flat Rock road, riding at a jog. The freight wagons that now connected the old town with the railroad had wheeled out deep ruts and now and then, where the desert dipped, he crossed a dry wash. The land ahead climbed slowly toward the mountains, and he could see the spaced green dots of the juniper trees.

When he reached a place he had in mind, where these scrub growths pinched in upon the road, he pulled off. Moving into the concealment of the stand, he swung down and rolled a cigarette. Smoking and waiting, he moved his mind deliberately from the task ahead and focused it on Hester and the marvel of her, and his wonder as to what Letty would do when she learned that Pike aimed to ask her to marry him.

If he ever got that far. He quit thinking of Hester because he couldn't dream like that and still want to ride into whatever might be waiting for him in Flat Rock.

He had been there less than an hour when, far down toward Long Branch, he saw a horsemen coming on at a fast clip. A mirthless smile formed on Pike's lips as he waited. He was certain it was Peeples coming, even before he could see well enough to be sure. The lawyer looked neither to right nor to left as he thundered past.

Pike waited another fifteen minutes, the smile gone from his face, the last doubt removed from his mind. Peeples would try to talk Waters out of setting a guntrap for the new deputy, and Peeples would fail to do it. Waters had been stretched out cold on Long Branch's main street, he had had his slick gunman picked out from under his nose in Flat Rock. He would not submit to arrest on Peeples's pleading.

Pike rose again to the leather and rode out to the road, turning left toward his previous destination. He put some three miles more behind him and was within sight of Flat Rock when he discerned, far forward, another rider coming toward him. It looked like Peeples. Pike had figured that it was two to one Peeples would come back along this road when he found that Pike Keating had not yet reached the town.

A little later, sure it was the lawyer, Pike reached down and loosened his sixgun in its holster. Peeples seemed to have recognized him, for he lifted the speed of his horse. Pike kept jogging on, and the lawyer raised a hand as they came closer together.

RIDING up, he said, "Wait a minute, Pike. I know what you think about me, and you're dead wrong. I can prove it by telling you that Waters has a guntrap set for you in Flat Rock. The whole damned town's siding him."

"Now, how," Pike drawled, "did Waters know I was coming?"

"All I know is that he expects you and is all set."

The lawyer had his hands folded on the horn of his saddle. His face broke into a scowl that darkened. Then suddenly he turned his hand over, and Pike's eyes narrowed when he saw the small, double-barreled derringer the man had swung to cover him. He had carried the little hideout weapon in a wrist clip up his sleeve.

"Still think so?" Peeples asked.

The man was smoked out into the open, finally, but all at once that was nothing but disaster to Pike. His own hand was too far away from his six-shooter for him ever to pull and fire it in time. But there was a slim chance he could still bluff Peeples.

"That was quite a slip you made when you didn't provide for a successor for me if I died," he said calmly. "So what you going to do, hold a gun on me from here on?"

"The Canfield girls are ready to forfeit the estate," Peeples said. "I've made up a waiver for them to sign. When they've signed, I'm going to kill you."

Pike felt the pulling muscles in his neck. Hester and Letty would never sign a waiver, but Peeples didn't realize that; they had put on too convincing an act. It looked as if Pike Keating had outsmarted himself considerably in this maneuver. The best he could hope for was to be held prisoner somewhere until Peeples was convinced the girls would not sign away their birthright.

Then the full, horrifying extent of Peeples's power came clear. When the girls refused to sign a waiver, the lawyer would know what to do. If they died, there would be no claimants to the estate, and he would still get it to liquidate. Peeples was in so deep now he wouldn't stop at killing the sisters.

For a moment, Pike fought his urge to defy that little gun. Then all at once he saw something, far past Peeples, down toward the edge of town. A party of four riders appeared on the road, coming fast. Excitement leaped in Pike. Peeples didn't want to kill him yet, not until he had tried the safer method of getting a waiver from the girls.

"Looks as if your showing up in Flat Rock and pulling out so suddenly aroused suspicion," Pike said. "Here comes a whole pack of Waters's men."

"You're bluffing," Peeples retorted, but suddenly he looked worried.

"If they get hold of me they'll do the job, and you can't stop 'em."

Peeples couldn't help himself. He edged his horse around, then turned his head. Pike knew that was the best break he would get, and he drove home his spurs. His horse crashed into the lawyer's; then Pike whirled and sent it sloping along the back trail. He got down as flat as he could on his horse's back, hearing Peeples's urgent outcry.

Pike rode low for a few minutes, then dared to straighten and look back. Peeples had not set out in pursuit. Instead, he had swung his horse across the road and was holding up his hand in an effort to bring the Flat Rock bunch to a stop. They surged around him, and then lead really began to fly.

Pike returned the fire, still pushing the fast Half Moon horse. He realized this was a fight to the finish when he recognized Pres Waters in the oncoming bunch. Peeples yelled at them furiously, then came after Pike. Pike bent his efforts to widening the gap between them. Ordinarily the Half Moon horse could have done it handily, but it wasn't fresh.

It was a situation nobody controlled, now, and it followed nobody's plan. For several moments it seemed a dead certainty to Pike that he would be run down and killed. The junipers where he had hidden to let Peeples pass loomed ahead. If he could get that far, Pike thought, he might be able to turn and make a stand.

The thundering horse brough him closer to the thicket, which crowned a low, wide rise. He thundered up the incline and then, all at once, stared hard to his right.

A man stood there waving urgently, and Pike's heart leaped when he saw the glint of a star. Inskeep was trying to motion him to swing up the bank into the thicket. Pike dug in the spurs again, for by then the rise had cut off sight of the men running after him. He drove the mount up the bank and into the woods. There he swung down and sped to where Inskeep waited for him.

They both dropped flat, wordlessly, with no time to exchange explanations. The Flat Rock contingent broke over the top of the slope, down the road, and Inskeep laid in a rifle shot. The party blew apart. A man threw up his arms, tilted backward, then was flung out of saddle by his wheeling horse. The others, throwing themselves out of leather, cut into whatever cover they could find at the edge of the road. As yet they figured they had only one man to handle.

PIKE flung a quick shot at Pres Waters. He saw Ralph Peeples cut in behind the same pile of slab rock as the tinhorn. Then lead, savage and searching, began to crisscross the gap. It steadied and grew more determined as the men on the other side learned that somehow they now had two guns to face.

A man who had gotten farther up the road than Waters and Peeples showed part of his head around a rock, his eyes searching for a chance. The gun in Pike's hand spat and kicked his palm, and he saw the man fall drunkenly into the open, thresh once, and then lie still. That left one man besides Waters, and there was no telling what Peeples's attitude would be now.

Even as Pike considered that, he heard the sheriff's rifle give its relentless crack. "Got another!" Inskeep called. "That tinhorn can't get away, so let's see how much nerve he has!"

"Go ahead," Pike answered.

"Waters," Inskeep shouted, "we have a warrant for you, and you can't get away! Come out of there with your hands up!"

For a moment there was only silence.

"Come on, Waters," Inskeep repeated, "or we'll blast you out of there."

The response was a strangely short and hollow explosion.

Immediately a voice other than Waters's shouted, "This is Peeples, Sheriff. He shot himself!"

"The devil he did," Pike whispered to Inskeep. "That was a derringer that went off. Peeples had one in a wrist clip."

"What are you doing with that bunch?" Inskeep shouted back to the lawyer.

"I couldn't help myself. I'm going to stand up, Sheriff. Is that all right?"

"Come on."

Ralph Peeples rose slowly from behind the rock pile and came out to the center of the road.

Inskeep slid down the bank, Pike behind him. The lawyer's eyes searched Pike; he seemed ready to deny anything that might be charged.

The sheriff went on around behind the rocks, and Pike followed him. Waters lay there, with a big hole in the middle of his forehead. He still had a six-shooter in his hand.

"I tried to save Pike from getting caught in their guntrap," Peeples said, "but he wouldn't listen."

"And," Inskeep said coldly, "Waters tried to give himself up, but you killed him."

"He shot himself."

"Where's the powder burn?"

Stepping quickly to Peeples, Inskeep slid up one of his coat sleeves to reveal the wrist clip. By then Pike had found the derringer, in the grass down the road, where Peeples had tossed it.

"You knew how much nerve a tinhorn really has," Inskeep added. "You knew he'd talk, once he found himself in real trouble. Peeples, you're under arrest for murder. I'm taking you to town."

For a moment wildness surged in Peeples's eyes. He stared down at the tinhorn, who had managed to betray him after all. Finally he shrugged.

"All right," he said.

When they were back at the Long Branch courthouse, with Peeples booked in jail, the sheriff said, "I know you told me to keep out of it, Pike. You'll have to blame Hester Canfield for my butting in.

"When the girls saw Peeples riding out of town in the same direction you went, they figured you were in trouble you weren't looking for. Hester came to me, and I went to Roberts and found out about the warrant you'd gotten for Waters.

"I was never gladder to see anybody in my life," Pike said.

"There's one you'll be gladder to see, and she's over at the hotel. Get over there right quick before she chews all her fingernails off."

Pike climbed the Senator's steps two at a time and headed for the door of the bridal suite.

He rapped and the door swung inward. It was Letty who opened it.

"We saw you ride in," she said, "and from the looks of Ralph Peeples, the situation seems to be settled."

"Not yet," Pike said. "There's still Hester. Where is she?"

"In the bedroom. Go on in."

Pike swallowed, then remembered that Hester might have wanted a little privacy when they saw each other.

The bedroom door wasn't closed, and as he came up to it he saw her standing by the window, looking at him, solemn and lovely and waiting.

"I nearly died," she said.

"Well, I didn't. And I'm now here to tell you I love you and aim to marry you pronto."

He walked over and took her in his arms. He heard the door being closed gently behind him, and it wasn't a breeze that shut it. It must have been Letty.

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"WHY JOHNNY CAN'T READ—
And What You Can Do About It" by Rudolf Flesch

VINNIE THOUGHT she loved good-natured Johnny Clay . . .

but she didn't really know her own heart till she met the

Stranger on

THINKING about it after it was all over, it seemed to Vinnie Sommers that if she were ever to write her own love story, it would have to begin on that warm, bright day in the spring, near the close of the school term.

She stood by a window, a medium-tall girl, slender and as straight as a ruler, with the afternoon sun warm against her face and the tumble of her blue-black hair. Her pupils had all gone home, and still in the back of her mind was the joy of teaching them, for she loved children. But in the immediate foreground of her thinking was young Johnny Clay, who had swung from his long-legged roan and was hurrying toward the small frame school that stood on the only low hill in this part of the vast Wyoming landscape.

"Hi, Johnny!" she called happily.

A tall, lean, stumblebum of a boy Vinnie's own age, he lifted his head at the sound of her voice. He had sandy hair, sunbleached and stubborn, and eyes the blue of the sky. Johnny was a little in awe of her, Vinnie knew, now that she had come back to teach school after being away a year in college. Smiling, she turned from the window to face the door.

He came in with his big old hat in his hands. "Hi, Vinnie," he said, his eyes lighting up at sight of her. "I'm on my way to the Lazy S to see how those calves are coming along. Thought I might as well stop by and—"

He kind of ran out of breath. But that was Johnny for you; he'd look at Vinnie and grow breathless. She wondered if he'd ever find the courage to ask her to marry him. Then she frowned faintly, thinking that a year away from home had put some doubts in her mind. Before she'd gone to college it had never occurred to her that she might not marry Johnny Clay. But now, sometimes she wasn't sure.

"I was hoping you'd ride along with me," he said.

"I was hoping you'd come and ask me," she said truthfully; for, regardless of her half-formed doubts, she liked being with him.

He had been as much a part of her life, so it seemed, as the great Wyoming sky and the endless miles of rolling grasslands. It was hard to imagine her life without him.

"I'll get your horse," he said.

He brought her pony from the shed that stood in a corner of the school yard. They rode to the Bighorn Trail and then cut northwest across the rolling grasslands. Vinnie did most of the talking, but that wasn't unusual, for Johnny was a quiet, shy boy.

However, when they came in sight of the sprawling ranch buildings and corrals, he said, "If we have any luck with those calves, maybe Lazy S and Slash C will pull through."

She knew how it was with her Uncle Jess, who owned the Lazy S, and with John Clay, Sr., and Johnny, owners of the Slash C. There had been some bad years, low prices, and mounting costs. Now, working toward a better grade of beef that would command a higher price, the two ranches had joined forces to introduce a thoroughbred Hereford strain into the range stock.

"Things just have to work out!" she said.

They rode into the yard and dismounted. Then they strolled to the pole corrals and stood looking at the Hereford bull, penned in a separate enclosure that joined the horse barn. King Gentle was the name given the bull on his pedigree papers, but there was nothing gentle about him. He glared back at them out of hate-filled, red-rimmed eyes.

By BEN FRANK

The Lazy S

Stepping out of her dress, Vinnie faced herself in the mirror in her room...

Suddenly he lowered his big hornless head and shoved furiously against the heavy plank gate.

Vinnie shuddered. "He scares me half to death."

"Me, too," Johnny admitted, but his eyes shone with pride of ownership. "He's a killer, all right. But if he weren't, we could never have raised enough money to buy him. I guess you know that."

She knew. Because King Gentle had killed a man, his former owner had been willing to part with him for half his value.

"Just the same—" she began, but the clatter of hoofs interrupted her. Turning, she lifted her eyes to the trail. "There comes

Uncle Jess. Someone's with him, Johnny."

They stood with their backs against the corral, watching the two riders canter in from the east. Jess Sommers was tall, weather-beaten and graying. The stranger—Vinnie felt a sudden touch of excitement. He was young and strikingly handsome.

Jess and the young man dismounted, and Jess said, "This is Herb Tracy. My niece, Vinnie, and Johnny Clay of the Slash C. Herb just rode in from Colorado. I liked the way he handles a rope and a horse, and I gave him a job."

AGAIN Vinnie's eyes turned to the stranger. He was tall, sunbrowned, and smiling. When he'd pulled off his fancy Stetson, she saw that he had thick dark hair. His eyes were gray and bold. He bowed slightly and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Vinnie."

Then he shook hands with Johnny in a friendly way. For some reason, Johnny seemed to shrink in stature and to look and act more awkward than any schoolboy.

"That's the rascal I was telling you about, Herb," Jess said, nodding toward King Gentle.

"What an animal!" Admiration filled Herb Tracy's voice. Then, smilingly, he added, "I hope that gate's as strong as it looks, Mr. Sommers."

Jess chuckled. "You don't have to worry about the gate as long as somebody doesn't forget to fasten it. Come on, Herb. I'll show you the bunkhouse and introduce you to my foreman."

The two men angled off toward old Ham Weaver, the foreman, who had rounded the far end of the bunkhouse. Watching, Vinnie was struck with the notion that whatever life held for her in the future would in some way be tied in with Herb Tracy. She knew it by the way his bold, direct gaze had set her heart racing.

"You going to ride out with me to look at those calves?" Johnny asked.

She glanced at the low sun and shook her head. "I'd better help Aunt Fay with supper. But you'll come back, Johnny, and eat with us, won't you?"

"Not tonight," he answered.

Something in his voice made her look sharply at him. He was long and lanky, and right now there was a worried expression in his blue eyes. But he gave her a grin as he swung up into the saddle.

"See you tomorrow, maybe," he said, and rode away.

She hurried into the big old house and up to the front bedroom. For as long as she could remember, this had been her room. She'd been a very small baby when her parents had died and her aunt and uncle had brought her to Lazy S.

She stepped out of her school clothes and then faced herself in the mirror. She was olive-skinned and lovely, a tiny mole on her right shoulder the only blemish on her strong lithe body. She thought of Herb Tracy and again felt the quickening of her pulse.

But there was Johnny Clay to think about, too—Johnny, who would die for her if she asked it of him. Somehow she knew the time was not far off when she must choose between Johnny and this stranger with the quick smile and the bold eyes. Frowning, she slipped into a gingham dress and then went down to the kitchen to help her aunt.

Vinnie didn't have an opportunity to see much of Herb Tracy until Saturday. But she heard a great deal about him.

"He's the best hand I've hired in many a day," Jess said once. Then, on another occasion, "Herb and a fellow just finished rounding up and breaking some wild horses. He tells me he thinks maybe he has enough saved to go into ranching for himself in a small way. I like that kind of a hustler."

Then, on Saturday afternoon, Vinnie rode out to the south range where the men were working. For quite a while she sat in her saddle, watching Herb, admiring the easy way he rode and roped. He must be twenty-two or three years old, she judged, and was as quick as lightning, as graceful as a cat. When he made a tricky cast that nine cowboys out of ten would have missed, she couldn't help cheering.

Grinning, he rode up to her. "I learned that little trick from an old rodeo rider," he said. "It's easier than it looks. Here, I'll show you how it's done."

Later, he rode beside her back to the ranch.

"So you're a teacher." His gray eyes moved over her admiringly. "Wonder if the kids know how lucky they are?"

It was his first compliment to her, and she felt a pleasant, tingling flush stealing into her cheeks.

Sunday afternoon, she and Herb went for a ride along Antler Creek. They came out of the pines and stopped facing a deep, quiet water hole. Suddenly Herb's gun was up and blasting, with an unexpectedness that made Vinnie jump. On the far side of the creek an old rusty bait can leaped into the air.

"Never could resist a target like that," he said, grinning.

It had been a long shot for a sixgun. Vinnie's dark eyes met his bold gaze challengingly. "You were lucky," she said. "You couldn't do it again to save your life."

"Want to bet?" Herb's grin widened. "A kiss if I can't hit it twice more without missing?"

Her heart skipped a beat, and an inner voice warned, watch it, Vinnie! But she laughed and said, "It's a bet."

His gun flashed up; the can spun and rolled. Before it came to rest, a second shot sent it whirling in the opposite direction. Smiling, Herb began to reload his gun. Vinnie waited, listening to the wild pounding of her heart. She felt half frightened, half eagerly expectant. But Herb turned his mount and began to ride back toward the Lazy S. Following, she felt a stir of anger and disappointment.

"So you aren't going to collect your bet?"

He looked at her soberly. "Yes, Vinnie, I'm going to collect. But not now; not until it will mean something more to you than paying off a bet."

"But suppose it never means any more than that?"

"It will," he said quietly.

It wasn't a boast, it was a simple statement of fact. And Vinnie could only avert her eyes and wonder if he knew how hard and fast her heart was beating.

JUST as darkness began to fall they rode into the Lazy S yard. Vinnie saw Johnny Clay and her Uncle Jess standing by the pole corral, watching King Gentle as he pawed up angry puffs of dust. Hearing their approach, Johnny turned around, stumbling a little over his own big feet.

"Hi," she said, swinging to the ground.

"Hi," he returned. He grinned, but his eyes were filled with a lost, hopeless expression.

Herb took the horses into the barn, and Jess trailed after him, leaving her alone with Johnny. For the first time in her life she couldn't seem to think of anything to say to him.

"Johnny," she said at last, "I'm starved. Let's go see what we can find to eat."

They raided the kitchen and carried the food out on the side porch. Still she couldn't seem to think of anything much to talk about.

"Next week's the end of school," she said lamely.

Again the silence took over.

"Those calves look pretty good," Johnny said presently. "Looks like the bank's going to renew our notes."

He tossed his cigarette into the darkness and put an arm around her slender waist. For some reason, the years seemed to roll back to the days before she had gone away to school. To those untroubled days when there had been no one but Johnny in her dreams. Relaxing, she laid her cheek against his shoulder like a small, tired child.

"Vinnie," he began.

He lifted her face and kissed her gently on the mouth. For a moment, it was right and good to be kissed like this by Johnny Clay. And then she remembered Herb and the bet she had made and lost. Unconsciously she drew away from Johnny. He let her go and rolled himself another cigarette. Then he stood, a tall, rangy figure in the starlight.

"I have to be going," he said. "Tomorrow's another working day. Be seeing you, Vinnie."

After that, she sat alone in the darkness, with a troubled uncertainty stirring through her. Johnny, Herb—how did a girl know when a certain man was right for her? As a background for her troubled thinking came the angry, restless stamping and pawing of King Gentle. Listening, she shuddered slightly. Then she became aware of approaching footsteps.

"Lonesome, Vinnie?" Herb Tracy asked. He reached down, found her hand, and lifted

her to her feet. "Listen to that old thoroughbred digging up the ground." He chuckled softly. "He's not only lonesome, but he's downright peeved about it."

He led her away from the house into the pitch-black shadows of a row of old cottonwoods. She couldn't see him, and he had let go of her arm, but she was so aware of his nearness that she was afraid to trust her voice.

"Funny how things work out," he said. "Like my meeting your Uncle Jess in Bighorn, his needing another hand, and my coming to the Lazy S and finding you. Do you believe in fate, Vinnie?"

Still she wasn't sure of her voice.

"I do," he said. "Like joining up with Joe Stone to go looking for wild horses in the mountains. I made a hatful of money, enough so that I wanted to come out here to look for land. Don't you see how things have worked out for us, Vinnie?"

She felt his fingers on her arms. His right hand moved up to her shoulder, to her cheek, to her hair, gently brushing it back from her forehead.

"Vinnie," he said, "now's the time to collect my bet."

His lips found hers, and she had neither the desire nor the strength to resist. A great hush seemed to settle over the world, freeing her every thought and emotion to respond to his kiss.

"The first moment I saw you, I knew it was going to be like this for us," he said huskily.

"I think I knew, too, Herb," she whispered.

They walked back to the house without saying anything more. At the front door, he kissed her once again before he let her go.

Up in her room, she sat by a window for a long time, staring out into the night. She thought of the thrill of Herb's touch, and the great wash of emotions that had left her weak and trembling. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. Yet, underlying it all, was a tracè of sadness for young Johnny Clay. He had been a fine part of her life for a long time. And again there was that tiny voice warning her not to let herself be swept completely off balance by a stranger's touch and words.

THE school term ended, setting Vinnie free for the summer. Quite often she rode out to the range where the men worked in the boiling hot sun. Always, her eyes followed Herb Tracy, and her pride in his skill in handling horses and cattle was a very warm thing in her heart.

Quite often, Johnny Clay came over to help. Watching Johnny and Herb work together—as they usually did, for Herb seemed to prefer Johnny to any of the others—she couldn't help comparing them. Johnny rode and roped better than the average cow hand, but he always looked a little ridiculous and awkward beside Herb.

Sometimes when Johnny's loop fell short and Herb picked up the steer that Johnny had missed, Vinnie felt sorry for the long rangy stumblebum and a trifle angry at Herb, because he did everything so much better and easier. But it was Herb, not Johnny, who could send her heart racing, with a touch of his hand or a quick smile.

It wasn't until a moon-splashed night in early July that Vinnie first detected a disturbing restlessness in Herb Tracy. They had ridden out to a granite butte that pointed a gleaming giant finger at the stars. Herb dropped to the ground and she swung down beside him. He kissed her and then ran his fingers over the curves of her face, touching her eyes gently and moving his hand to the back of her head. It was when he suddenly released her and leaned back against the butte that she sensed something must be wrong.

"What's troubling you, Herb?" she asked anxiously.

He didn't answer her immediately. He rolled a smoke with quick, deft fingers and lit it. Then he sent a stream of smoke into the moonlight.

"I picked up my mail in town this afternoon," he said. "I had a letter from my friend Joe Stone. He's been to Cheyenne and is coming back through Bighorn. He wants me to go to Arizona with him."

Suddenly she felt a touch of fear. Suppose he should leave and never come back? "Are you going with him, Herb?"

"No," he answered at last.

For a moment, she was wildly happy. He

wanted to stay here with her more than he wanted to go with Joe Stone. But, and now she was disturbed again, suppose there came a time when his restlessness became stronger than his love? Could any woman ever be sure of a man like Herb Tracy? He drew her close and kissed her again, but she couldn't quite put her doubts aside.

It was almost a week later when Vinnie's Uncle Jess and Aunt Fay drove to Bighorn for supplies, leaving her alone at the old ranch house. Her work finished, she stood by a window, watching the wind sweep traces of dust across the browning yard. Lonely, restless, unsure of herself, she at last climbed

"He's headed toward L. A. on the Chief!"

the stairs to her room and opened her mother's trunk.

There were old pictures of parents she couldn't remember, trinkets, and clothes. Digging deeper, she found what she was looking for—her mother's wedding gown, yellowed by the years but still soft and beautiful. Not since she had gone away to school had she dressed up in the gown. When she had been a child, she had put it on many times to dream that she was walking down the aisle of some fine church toward Johnny Clay.

Smiling, she slipped into the dress and ran downstairs to look at herself in the full-length mirror. Against the lacy whiteness of the dress, her hair looked very, very dark. She was much like her mother had been, she knew from the pictures. She heard Herb's step on the front porch. Before she could reach the stairs, he had stepped through the doorway.

For an instant he stood staring at her, his face slack. "What's going on?" he mumbled.

"It was my mother's dress. I was—"

"You'll make a beautiful bride someday, Vinnie." He had recovered from his surprise and was smiling broadly, but she thought she detected a wary expression in his eyes. "I just came to tell you I'm going to Bighorn to say hello to Joe Stone," he went on quickly. "I should be back before dark."

He turned and walked out of the house.

She stood staring at the empty doorway. Was Herb actually afraid of being trapped by marriage? Had seeing her in the wedding gown frightened him? Did he think she was trying to hurry him into marriage? Was he running out on her while he still had his freedom?

Her head in a whirl, Vinnie climbed the stairs to her room and slipped out of the gown. No, Herb was in love with her. She was simply imagining things. Of course he'd never asked her to marry him, but then they'd known each other only a few weeks.

After she had returned the gown to the trunk, she dressed in a dark riding skirt and a white blouse. Then she stepped to the window and saw Herb. He had saddled his own horse and was riding toward the Bighorn Trail. Usually he rode one of the half-wild Lazy S broncs. "Got to keep in practice," he would say with a laugh.

A cold sickness filled her. Sinking down on the bed, she began to tremble. Suppose he had decided things were becoming a bit too complicated and he'd better get out before he became too deeply involved with her?

SHE leaped to her feet. She wouldn't let him go. She would follow him, catch him, and if he insisted on going away with Joe Stone, she would go with him, to Arizona or anyplace ele. It didn't matter. Grabbing up her hat, she ran down the stairs and out to the horse barn.

He had only a few minutes' start and shouldn't be hard to overtake, she kept thinking as she rode. At the top of every hill she expected to see him. But only the emptiness met her gaze, and she was almost frantic by the time she came to the cut-off that led to to the old school house. Then, topping a slope, she saw him in a little valley below.

He was tall and straight in the saddle, the high sun throwing a shadow to his left, his horse kicking up a little cloud of dust. But at the sight of him, some of her pride returned, making her pull her blowing pony up short. She knew then how foolish it would be to go to him like this, begging him not to leave her. She wasn't even sure that he was running away. She rode on to the school, dropped down on the well curb, and let the hot, blinding tears stream down her cheeks.

This was where Johnny Clay found her. He was on his way home from the south range. Seeing him through a blur of tears, she wanted to run or hide. But of course she couldn't, so she tried to smile up at him.

"What's wrong, Vinnie?" he asked anxiously.

She couldn't lie to Johnny, and she couldn't tell him the truth. So she said, "Don't worry about it. I'll be all right in a minute."

She could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't believe her. He slid to the ground, pumped cold water over his big red bandanna, and washed her face. Then he sat down beside her, but didn't say a word, or touch her.

Finished with her crying, she said, "See, I'm all right."

Johnny gave her a searching look. "Okay," he said, getting to his feet. "Sure you don't want to tell me what it's all about?"

"No, Johnny."

"There's nothing I can do?"

She shook her head.

He swung up into the saddle and gave her a sad little grin. "The sun's still shining, Vinnie."

"I know," she said, smiling back at him.

"Always remember I'll be around any time you want me."

With that, he rode away at a fast clip. At the top of a hill, he turned and waved. Then he was gone. Almost too tired to stand, Vinnie at last climbed on her horse and rode back to the Lazy S.

It was almost midnight when Herb Tracy returned to the ranch. Vinnie heard his voice in the darkness as he spoke to his horse, the creak of leather as he stripped off the saddle. So he hadn't run away from her, after all. How foolish she had been to have so little faith in him!

The memory of the times he had taken her in his arms made it easy to forget her doubts and fears. Some day she would tell him how frightened she had been, and they would laugh about it together. And then she remembered Johnny Clay, who had found her weeping and had been so gentle and understanding. Again she wondered how a girl could be sure that one of the two men in her life was the right one for her.

Looking back on it afterward, it seemed to Vinnie that the ending of her love story, if a love story ever has an ending, began the very next afternoon when she went up to her room to write some letters. Jess, Johnny, Herb and old Ham Weaver were out by the corrals, cutting out a string of yearlings to ship to a buyer in Cheyenne.

Glancing through a window, she saw that Herb was now the only one left in the corral. He rode among the milling, bawling yearlings, and the fine sight of him made her heart beat fast. Soon, she knew, she must make up her mind about him.

Presently she saw Herb leave the inner corral by the gate and disappear around the corner of the big barn. A moment later she heard the shout of the men, and decided to go outside to watch them make the final count of the Slash C and Lazy S brand.

Her Uncle Jess and and Johnny were in the outer corral, on foot, when King Gentle pounded out of the barn and crashed against the gate.

She saw the gate swing open. She heard old Ham shout, "Get out of there, men!" She saw the wind whip the tally sheets from Jess's hand just before he turned and ran for the pole fence.

A big, slow-moving man, he didn't have a chance, without help. But suddenly he had help. Johnny Clay was waving his hat and

yelling, cutting in between Jess and the charging killer. Without missing a step, King Gentle swung away and lunged at Johnny.

TERRIFIED, the yearlings had bunched themselves in the far end of the corral. Ham Weaver had climbed up on the fence and was helping Jess up and over. Herb was moving toward the fence, hatless, a lariat in his hands. But Johnny and King Gentle held Vinnie's horrified attention.

Johnny flung his big hat into the bull's face and side-stepped. But then something happened.

Maybe he simply stumbled over his own big feet. She never knew; no one ever knew, not even Johnny himself. With a wild flinging of his long arms he fell forward, landing with a sickening thud that knocked the wind out of his long, lean body. Roaring, King Gentle lowered his head and charged.

In that split second, Vinnie suddenly knew how it was. Losing Johnny would be like losing the sun and the rain and the air to breathe.

"Johnny, Johnny!" she cried.

Her voice seemed to reach him. He lifted his head to look toward her, but he seemed powerless to get to his feet.

She tried not to watch, but she couldn't close her eyes or shift her gaze. Then she saw a rope snake out and jerk taut with a sharp "zing." King Gentle went to his knees and rolled, and Herb Tracy, who had made the cast, snubbed the rope up a little shorter about a fence post.

Johnny stumbled to his feet, reached the fence, and sort of fell over it. Vinnie, sobbing with relief, ran to him. Then Jess and the old foreman came up, while Herb stood smiling modestly and looking as if what he'd done was an everyday occurence.

Pale beneath his tan, Johnny moved away from Vinnie. He held out a hand to Herb and said shakily, "Thanks, Herb. Maybe I can do something for you some time." Then he looked at Vinnie and she saw the hopelessness in his eyes.

But at that moment Jess stepped up to Johnny and said, "If it hadn't been for you, son, I wouldn't be alive."

Johnny grinned and said, "You'd have done the same for me, Jess." Then he climbed on his horse and rode away.

Suddenly Jess was scowling at the corral gate. "The whole thing was my fault. I was the last one to open and shut that gate."

Suddenly Vinnie was staring at Herb, remembering that he'd been in the corral after Jess and the others had gone for another bunch of yearlings, that it was Herb who had been the last one to shut the gate.

She waited for him to speak up, to take the blame for failing to fasten the gate. But he turned away and began to coil his lariat. As the silence grew, she remembered some small things, none of them important, but they added up: Herb's always picking a bad horse to ride to show his riding skill; his trick roping; chosing Johnny for a working partner, and then out-doing him. She remembered that Herb couldn't resist a target like an old bait can. And she knew now that he would never admit it was his carelessness in failing to fasten the gate that had given him a chance to save a man's life with his tricky roping.

For a moment, Vinnie felt crushed. But the moment passed so quickly it astonished her. Then she knew it didn't make any difference to her what Herb did or didn't do. In that terrible moment when she'd thought Johnny was going to die, she'd learned the truth. Johnny was her man.

Suddenly Vinnie could laugh—at herself and at all the others whom Herb had fooled. She could even laugh at Herb, who had fooled himself into believing he was a hero.

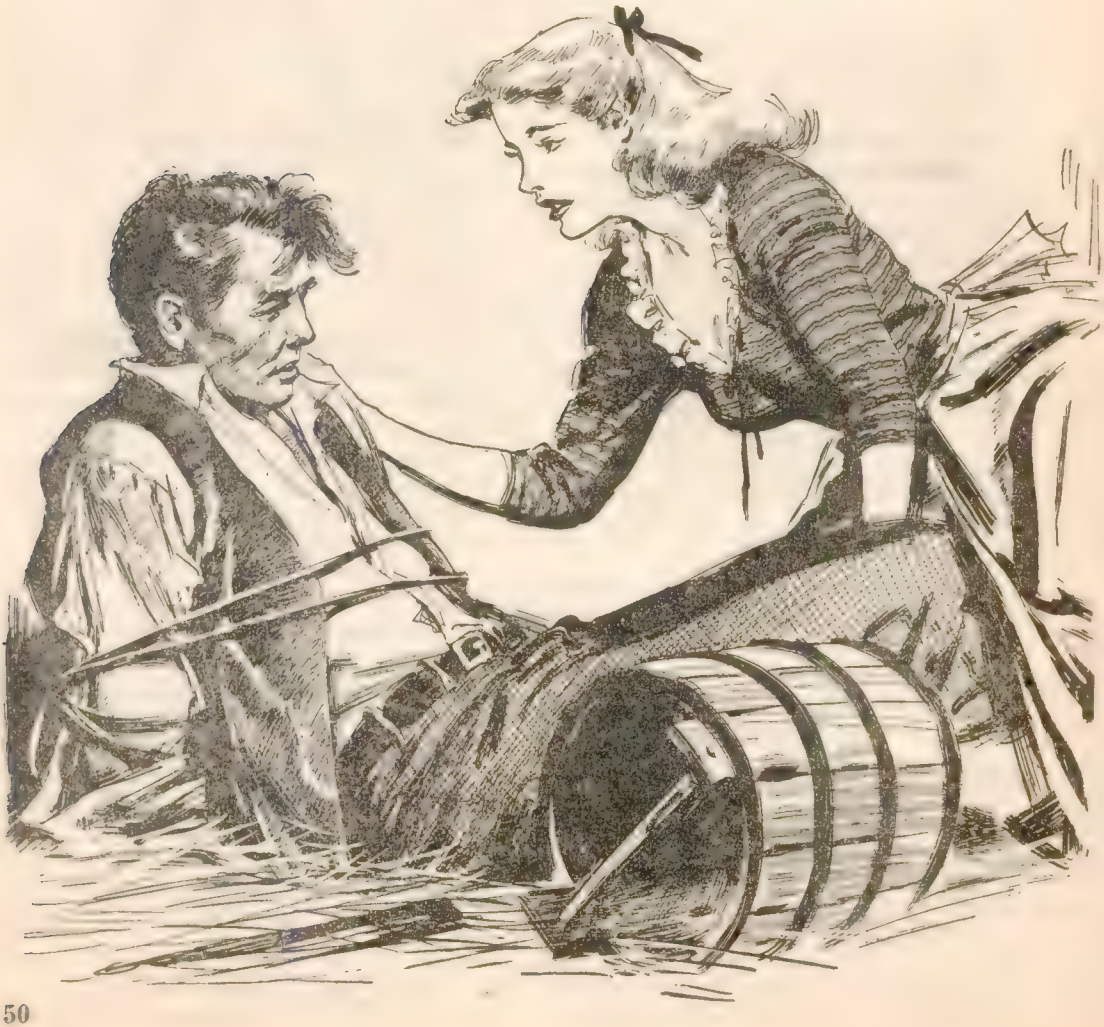
She caught up with Johnny at the school house. He was pumping a drink for himself and his horse. Johnny Clay was not much for looks, not one to show off by pulling a rabbit out of his hat. But when you needed him he was always around. Her eyes shining, she swung to the ground and ran to him.

There was no point in beating about the bush. "Johnny," she asked, "aren't you about ready to tell me you love me?"

"Who, me?" he said in astonishment. Then he looked deep into her eyes, and his astonishment vanished. "I love you, Vinnie," he said, taking her into his arms.

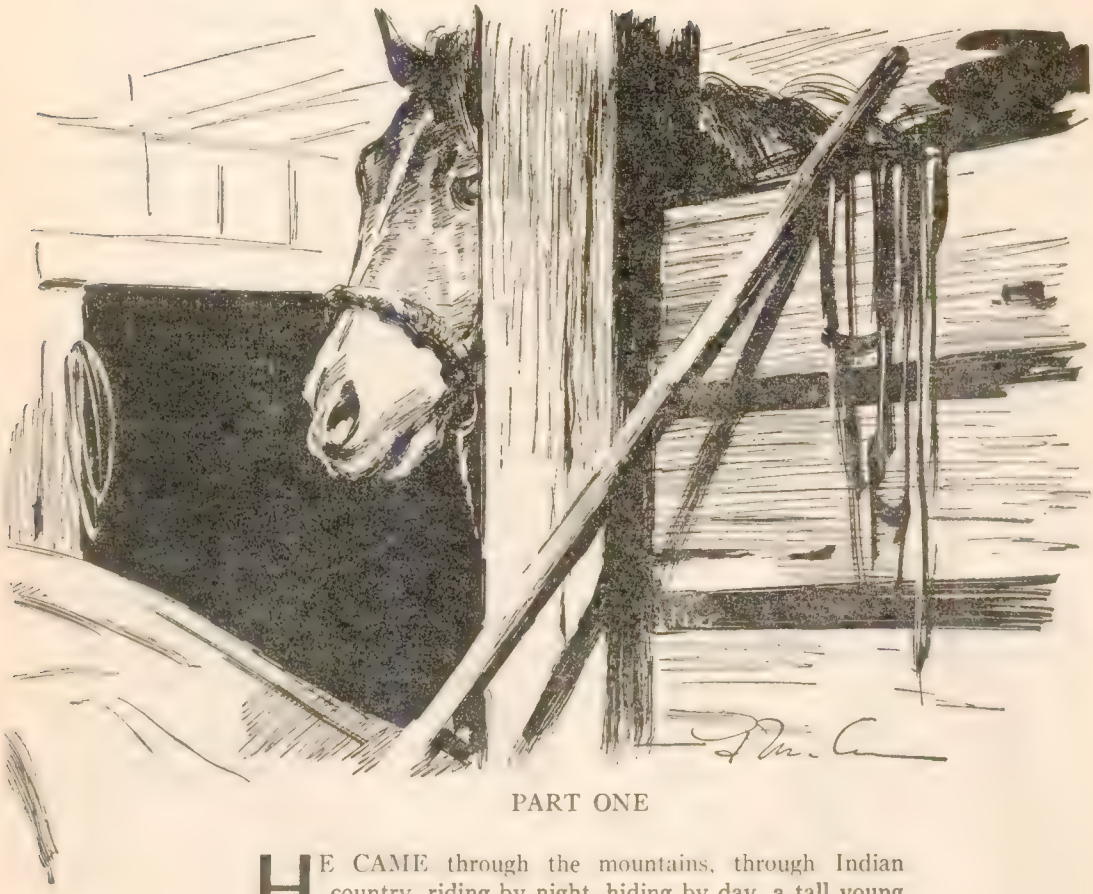
Five Graves

THE LETTER WARNED Doug Callander to stay away . . . but between the lines he read a challenge that he return . . . to face a great danger and to right a great wrong



West

by PHILIP KETCHUM



PART ONE

HE CAME through the mountains, through Indian country, riding by night, hiding by day, a tall young man on a wiry mustang, his skin deep tanned by sun and wind, his eyes red rimmed, his face showing the strain of the worry which gripped him. Here in the Stoney River basin he faced danger. He was going to have to be concerned about a man named Roger Quigley, and those who rode for him or were lined up behind him.

He packed and lit his pipe, and sat down and drew from his pocket a letter he had received ten days before. It was the letter which had prompted this return trip to the Stoney River basin. It had shocked him as no letter he had ever received. And, on sober reflection, it had puzzled him, for there were things about it he couldn't understand.

He had read it many times, but now he read it again.

Dear Doug:

I don't know that you will receive this, but I hope you do, for I think you should know that trouble between your father and a rancher new to the basin named Roger Quigley, came to a head in a gun battle at your father's ranch last night. Your father was seriously, perhaps fatally, injured. Eddie was killed.

Several days ago I had a talk with your father. He seemed to anticipate what might happen. He told me then that, in the event of his death and Eddie's, I was to take steps to sell his ranch and cattle, and send the money to you. He told me, definitely, to insist that you remain in Wyoming. He felt, and I do, that it would be a mistake to carry on the feud.

This is not an easy letter to write, for your father was a close friend of mine. Should it seem that he will recover from his wounds, I will get in touch with you at once. Otherwise, I will protect your interests to the best of my ability, offering the ranch and your father's stock for sale. When the estate has been liquidated I will send you the money. It thus will not be necessary for you to come to Waggoner.

The market is not good. We cannot hope to realize what your father's ranch or cattle are really worth, but I will do everything possible to make a good sale. If this is satisfactory, please let me know by letter.

With all good wishes,

Irv Cozad

Doug Callander read the letter twice, then folded it, returned it to his pocket, and sat where he was, struggling with the impressions it gave him rather than with what it said. It was brief and lacking in detail, and was cold blooded, businesslike. It told him none of the things he wanted to know.

It didn't explain what the trouble was about, or the fight at his father's ranch. It didn't say what had happened to Quigley, if anything. It took out of his hands the decision as to what to do with his father's ranch —if his father were dead. It warned him to stay away from the basin, but challenged him to return.

There were six or eight ranches in this land above the river, and as many below it. Doug's father's ranch, above the river, lay almost dead ahead, beyond the land owned by Carl Schinn. To the east, over a fingering hogback, were McAdams's ranch, Touissant's, Pettit's, and one or two others. And somewhere, here in the basin, was Roger Quigley's.

He knocked out his pipe, dropped it into his pocket, and considered what he ought to do. It was a good four-hour ride to Waggoner. With luck he could make it to the river unobserved. He could wait, then, in the fringing trees near the town, and after dark walk in and find his way to Irv Cozad's. A plan like that seemed more sensible than any other. He didn't want to advertise his return to the valley until he had had an opportunity to size things up.

He was halfway to the river, crossing an open stretch of country, when two horsemen topped the low hill to his left. They reined up there and, after a brief hesitation, rode on, following a course which would bisect his. Doug shifted his weight in the saddle. The possibility of a chance meeting like this had always been in the cards. He had hoped to avoid it, and still could avoid it by running, but he wasn't yet ready to run.

He loosened his holster gun and rode on at a steady clip. He didn't know what he was going to say when he met the two men. If they didn't recognize him, any story would do. If they did—they at least might be able to answer some of the questions gnawing at his mind.

The two men drew nearer, then reined up as they met him. One was thin, stooped, well past middle age. It was Carl Schinn. The other was younger, darkly tanned, and had an ugly, scowling face. The younger man seemed to have no idea who Doug was, but Schinn recognized him almost immediately.

He caught his breath and gasped, "Callander! Doug Callander!"

"That's right," Doug said. "How are you, Carl?"

SCHINN glanced nervously at the younger man, then looked at Doug again. "I had no idea you had come home. Doug, this is Tino Rossi. He's one of the men working for me."

"Hello, Rossi," Doug said.

He noticed the way Rossi's eyes had narrowed at the mention of Doug's name, and the tension which seemed to have gripped him.

"Howdy, Callander," Rossi said.

Schinn spoke quickly. "Doug, I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened.

Your father was one of my best friends. Eddie was a fine young chap. If there's anything I can do—"

Doug knew from what Schinn had said that his father was dead. He had come here as fast as he could, hoping to get here while his father was still living. From the tone of Cozad's letter, he had known there wasn't much chance of making it in time, but he had hoped, desperately, that he would.

"When did my father die?" he asked bleakly.

"Two days after the fight at the ranch. Doc Sherman did what he could for him, Doug, but he didn't have a chance."

Doug straightened and took a deep breath. His thoughts centered briefly on the fiery stubborn man who had been his father. The sheriff once had complained that Sam Callander would go out of his way to pick a fight. Doug didn't think that was true, but he would have agreed that his father never dodged a fight, and perhaps was too quick tempered. Yet, with all that, he had been a fair man, and honest to a fault.

Doug turned his head to stare at Carl Schinn. "Who's Roger Quigley?" he demanded. "What was the trouble about?"

"Quigley's been here about two years. He bought the McAdams ranch. From the day he moved in there were rumors of trouble between him and your father. About a month ago a herd of Quigley's cattle was stampeded over the claybanks. Quigley blamed the stampede on your father, swore out a warrant for his arrest, and he and his men and a good many others rode with the sheriff to serve it. Your father ordered them off his place; he wouldn't recognize the posse as a posse. Someone started shooting. Before the shooting was over, Eddie and two others were dead and your father was badly wounded."

"I suppose the thing to do would be to talk to the sheriff," Doug said reflectively.

"Yes, I think that's what you should do," Schinn agreed.

Doug lifted the reins of his horse. He said, "It was nice to see you again, Carl. Glad to have met you, Rossi."

Both nodded and rode on past him, Rossi trailing Schinn. Doug watched them go, and saw that Rossi had reined up and had whipped his gun into the air—a gun aimed at Doug. He threw himself from the saddle, away from Rossi, drawing his gun as he fell. He heard the roar of Rossi's shot, heard the bullet singing above his saddle. Crouching on the ground, he fired under his horse's belly, then fired again.

Rossi jerked as though from a body blow. His horse reared into the air, spilling him from the saddle. He fell on his face in the dirt and afterward didn't move.

Doug came slowly to his feet, his gun still in his hand, half covering Carl Schinn, who was fighting to control his horse. Doug remembered, now, that Schinn had been looking around as Rossi whipped up his gun, and that he hadn't shouted a warning. It wasn't possible he hadn't known what Rossi meant to do.

The rancher's horse settled down, and, under a tight rein, sidestepped toward Doug. "This is awful," Schinn said. "I never guessed what Rossi had in mind."

"You saw him draw his gun," Doug said flatly. "Did you want me to die, Schinn? Were you one of those who rode with the posse the night my brother and father were killed?"

Schinn shook his head. "I didn't—I never —" His voice choked up. A pale, drawn, frightened look had come into his face.

"Unbuckle your gun belt," Doug ordered. "Let it slide to the ground." When Schinn had done so, Doug said crisply, "Now your rifle. Pull it from its boot and drop it."

Without a word, Schinn obeyed.

"Now ride off halfway to the hill," Doug said. "Wait there until I leave, then come back here, pick up Rossi's body, and ride it to town, or back to the ranch, or wherever you want to. But first tell me this: where do you stand here in the basin? On whose side?"

"I'm not on any side," Schinn said thickly.

"Did you ride with the posse the night my father and brother were killed?"

"No."

Doug shrugged. That was a matter which could be checked. "Start riding," he ordered.

Schinn wheeled away, then reined up and looked back. He called, "Doug, you can't

buck Roger Quigley; he's too strong. He has too many men riding for him, and he has the law on his side. If you're smart you'll head out of the basin and never come back."

"Then I'm not smart," Doug said.

HE WATCHED Schinn ride off, then scanned the hilltops in a circling look at the horizon. The shots fired here might bring other men riding in this direction. Then he stepped quickly to where Rossi was lying and knelt over him for a moment. Rossi was dead.

Doug walked to where his horse had strayed, climbed into the saddle, and rode away, lifting his horse to a gallop. He didn't feel good, and wouldn't for a long time. It wasn't a pleasant thing to realize he had killed a man.

The sun marched its slow, steady course across the sky, dropping finally out of sight below the western hills. Doug Callander had spent the afternoon under the trees fringing Stoney River, just below the town of Waggoner. Soon, now, he would ride on to the town and have a talk with Irv Cozad. What he had learned from Carl Schinn whetted his appetite for more details of the story.

He filled and lit his pipe once more, and as he smoked it reviewed for the dozenth time what Schinn had told him. It could be briefed like this: a man named Roger Quigley had bought the McAdams place two years ago. From the time he had moved into the basin, he had had trouble with Sam Callander.

This trouble had eventually culminated in his charge that Callander was responsible for stampeding a herd of his cattle over the claybanks. He had made the charge official and, with the sheriff's support, had ridden to the Callander ranch. There a fight had resulted, and in the fight Eddie and Sam Callander had been killed.

To Doug, there seemed two prime flaws in the story. If his father had a quarrel with a man, he carried it to the man. It wasn't like him to stampede a man's cattle to get even with him. Nor was it like him to deny the authority of the law. He had been a leading figure in the struggle to bring law and order to the Stoney River basin.

It was almost black enough, now, to ride on. Doug saddled up, mounted, and started up river. He would make Irv Cozad's his first stop when he got to Waggoner. He would hear what Cozad had to say. And then, unless what Cozad said gave him a different idea, he would tell the attorney it was his plan to move to his father's ranch and start running it. He had reached that decision this afternoon. It struck him as exactly the thing to do.

He found Irv Cozad's house without difficulty, noted a light at the curtained windows, and, dismounting in front of it, tied his horse to the hitching post. A moment later he was knocking on the front door.

The Irv Cozad he remembered had been a tall, thin, stooped young man who had come here from the East, fighting consumption. A dry, hacking cough had interrupted almost every sentence he spoke. But he had been pleasant enough, and had had many friends.

The Irv Cozad who opened the door to him was still tall, thin and stooped, but his youth seemed gone. His skin was tight across the bones of his face, his eyes were buried in deep, dark wells, and his hair was almost gone.

"What is it?" he asked, and there was an irritable note in his voice, as though he resented being disturbed.

"I'm Doug Callander," Doug said.

The man in the doorway straightened and stepped back. He gasped, "Callander!" Then he asked quickly, "Does anyone know you're in town? Does anyone know you came here?"

"I doubt it," Doug said.

"Come on in. Close the door," Cozad said.

Once they were inside, the attorney asked, "Didn't you get my letter?"

"I got it," Doug admitted.

"Then why did you come back? You didn't have to."

"I wanted to."

The attorney rubbed his thin, boney hands together. "If you're smart you'll ride out again, let me sell your father's ranch for what I can get, and be glad to take the money I send you. I told you, in the letter I wrote, not to come here."

"And you wrote the kind of letter that almost surely would bring me."

"That's not true."

"Read it again, Cozad. Read between the lines."

Doug pulled the letter from his pocket. He held it out to the attorney, who shook his head.

"The point is, now that you're here, what are you going to do?"

"Run my father's ranch," Doug said.

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"I can answer that question in one word—Quigley."

"How can Quigley stop me?"

"With a bullet, Callander, a bullet he could fire, or that might be fired by any of his men. He wants your ranch for his son, made me an offer for it the other day. That isn't why he fought your father. They clashed because of other differences. I don't think it was in Quigley's mind to take over your ranch when he and your father fell out, but now that the land is available, he can see a way to use it. His son Bill is wild, irresponsible, too big for his britches. He won't make a go of running a ranch, but it's natural that Quigley would think he might. At least it's a way to to try to settle him down."

DOUG said, "Tell me about Quigley." The attorney crossed to one of the chairs in the room and sat down in it. He said, "Quigley's about forty-five. He's a big man, and proud of his strength. He's arrogant, and intolerant of weakness. He's been a rancher all his life, knows the business. He came here with a fistful of money, bought the McAdams place, and sent out for half the men who ride for him. They are men who rode for him before. They know how to use the guns they wear, but they know the cattle business, too. They're not only fighters, they can do a job on the range—and they have. The old McAdams ranch is making money for Roger Quigley. McAdams never did much more than break even."

"In your letter you said the market was bad."

"It is, but Quigley is a sharp operator. He's practical and efficient, a tough man to buck."

"What's his son like?"

"He's tall, too good looking, and too much interested in women—any kind of women."

"Is Quigley married?"

"He wasn't when he came here, but about a year ago he went to Kansas City and came back with a wife. She's younger than he is, about thirty, tall, slender, and beautiful—and, if I'm any judge, unhappy."

"Why?"

"Who knows? At a guess, Waggoner isn't much of a town in comparison to Kansas City, and Quigley's too bsuy to spend much time with his wife. He brings her to town with him sometimes, but not often."

Doug nodded thoughtfully. "What was the real trouble between my father and Roger Quigley?"

"It started over Quigley's proposal for an association here in the basin. It would have been an association he dominated and controlled. Your father opposed it. Sam Callander was an individualist; he always marketed his own cattle. He wasn't going to turn the job over to a committee Quigley would run. But that was only their first point of difference. They tangled on other issues; it seemed almost that whatever Quigley proposed, your father was against. And Sam Callander was no little man who could be run over. Quigley couldn't take it. Sam rated as high as he did in the basin, so Sam had to be smashed. And that's what happened."

"Tell me about the stampede."

"About a month ago, Quigley lost close to fifteen hundred head of his best stock. He was grazing them on one of the high meadows in the east basin, where Stoney Creek bends down from the mountains. If you remember the basin, the river cuts deep up there. Quigley had the drop over the claybanks well fenced, but one night someone cut the fence and stampeded his cattle. He called your father and brother guilty and got a warrant for their arrest. With his men, the sheriff, and a few others, he rode out to your ranch. That was the night your brother was killed, and your father wounded so seriously he died."

"I don't believe my father had anything to do with the stampede. That doesn't sound like him."

"He didn't deny it."

"Where were Father's men the night of the fight at the ranch?"

"Some were there. One was killed. After the fight was over, those who surrendered were brought into town, jailed for a time, then were let go on the promise that they would leave the basin. Quigley was responsible for that, and it was a smart move on his part. It made him seem generous in victory, and avoided further trouble. He's no mean opponent, Callander. Your father learned that the hard way."

Doug paced back and forth across the room. He had a feeling that Cozad was giving him a fairly true story of what had happened, and an honest appraisal of what he would be up against if he tried to stay here and run the Callander ranch. But he couldn't accept a part of what the attorney had said. He couldn't believe his father and Eddie were guilty of stampeding Quigley's cattle.

It just didn't fit his father's character. Sam Callander wouldn't have fought a man that way. Another thing made him believe his father wasn't guilty of starting the stampede. If the charge were false, his father might have gone contrary to his belief in law and order and questioned the authority of the posse, feeling it was not representative of the law, or that the law had been captured by Roger Quigley.

But Doug needed more information than this. He needed to talk to someone who had been close to his father, who had ridden for him. Or perhaps Doc Sherman might be able to help him. If Sam Callander had regained consciousness before he died, he might have left some statement for his son, some final word.

THE attorney said slowly, "Quigley is counting on buying your ranch for his son. He's not going to like it if you try to pick up the pieces and run it yourself. In fact, he won't stand for it. You're too easy to eliminate. Do you remember why you left the basin eight years ago?"

"I killed a man in a gun fight, but it was self-defense."

"And your father advised you to run, knowing that, if you didn't, you'd have to face other gun fights with the friends of the man you killed. So you left. Maybe you haven't killed anyone since; maybe you've lived a model life. But it won't be hard to remind people around here that you fled from the basin after a gun fight.

"And it won't be hard to convince them that you came back to get even with Quigley for your father's death. That means you will be a perfect set-up for Quigley. You can be cornered, forced into a fight, shot down, and who would believe you weren't responsible for what happened? No one."

Doug ran his fingers through his hair. He said, "Cozad, I've got to find out more about that stampede. After I leave here I'm going to see Doc Sherman. Maybe my father made some statement before he died. In the meantime, I want you to do several things for me."

"What?"

"First, tell Quigley the Callander ranch isn't for sale. Tell him I'm back, and that I'm going to run it myself. Now, what about money? How much did my father have in the bank? Can I use it?"

"Your father's money in the bank is tied up until the estate is probated, but if you need money, I can let you have some."

"You? Why?"

"Don't ask me why, Callander. It'll be money thrown away. You won't live long enough to make use of it, unless you strike at the core of the problem in a hurry."

"You mean—Quigley?"

"Who else? Without Quigley, his crowd will fall apart."

Doug stared thoughtfully at the attorney. He thought he was beginning to understand him. For some reason or other which wasn't yet clear, Cozad wanted to see Quigley smashed. The letter he had written and all he had said tonight, leading up to his offer of money, pointed in that direction.

"Is anyone at the ranch?" Doug asked then.

"The court appointed a caretaker, Cy Liggett."

A knock on the door interrupted him. Cozad straightened, his head jerking that way. He came to his feet. "Wait in the kitchen," he said in a husky whisper.

"Suppose you learn your father did it?" she asked. "What then?"

"I probably won't wait," Doug answered. "See you another time, Cozad."

The knock on the door was repeated, more insistently. "Just a minute," Cozad called irritably. "I'm coming."

He started toward the door.

Doug found his way out through the kitchen. Before he left he heard the rumble of voices from the front room, but couldn't distinguish what was being said. It ran through his mind that Quigley might already know he was here, and might have men in town, watching for him. Such a possibility was something he ought to consider.

He searched the shadows around him, but nowhere saw any sign of movement. He crossed the yard, circled behind the next house, and cut toward the main street. Doc Sherman lived on the other side of town. Doug was leaving his horse behind him, tied in front of Cozad's. If all went well he might return for it. But right now he was better off on foot, and without a horse to worry about. Five minutes later he stood on Doc Sherman's porch, knocking on the door.

Doc Sherman was short, chunky, middle aged, and had a round, pink face. He stared at Doug through the thick glasses he was wearing, recognized him almost instantly, and cried, "Doug Callander! Come on in, man. I've been half expecting to see you for days."

He shoved out his hand. Doug shook it, appreciating the warmth and sincerity of the doctor's greeting. He stepped into the house and was immediately aware of the others in the front room, a woman and a little girl who looked five or six. The girl was seated on the table, soaking her hand in a basin of water.

The woman who stood near her was tall, dark-haired, slender, and seemed almost too young to be the child's mother. The minute he saw her Doug had a feeling she was someone he knew. As he stared at her, her name came to him—Hannah Loring.

He pulled off his hat. "Hello, Hannah."

"Hello, Doug," she said gravely.

"Put your hat someplace, Doug," Doc Sherman suggested. "I'll be with you soon as I finish with Marie. She cut her hand rather badly and it got infected."

HE WALKED up to the table, lifted the girl's hand from the basin, and stared at the cut in it. Hannah asked a question and the doctor answered it, and they went on talking together. Doug stood watching them, wondering whom Hannah had married, for she obviously was Marie's mother.

When he knew her, eight years ago, she had been a girl of about eighteen, and had just moved to Waggoner with her parents, who worked for the stage line serving the town. For a while after her arrival a dozen young men had vied for her favors. He had been one of them himself, but the trouble he had run into had taken him out of the picture.

Doc Sherman was bandaging the little girl's hand now. When he finished, he helped her into her coat. Then, lifting her into his arms, he turned with Hannah toward the door.

"You've a cute child, Hannah," Doug said.

"But she's quite a handful to manage." Then she added, "When did you get back, Doug?"

"Just today."

"Then you don't know—that is—"

"I know what happened to Father and Eddie," Doug said. "That's why I came. I haven't been here long enough to know what I'm going to do."

She wanted to say something, possibly to warn him as Cozad had done. Doug could sense that as clearly as though she had expressed herself in words. Something, however, held her back, and stood in the way of what she might have said. She turned away, took Marie from the doctor's arms, and stepped toward the door. There, she said something in a low voice to the doctor, and in another moment was gone.

When Doc Sherman turned back from the door, he was frowning. "She ordered me to talk to you," he said bluntly. "She has an idea you might have come back to get even with Quigley, and I've got to admit the same thought has occurred to me. Is there any truth to it, Doug?"

Doug made an irritable motion with his arm. "Doc, what would you do if you were in my place, if you heard your father and brother had been cornered and shot down?"

"They were resisting arrest by a sheriff's posse."

"But charged with a crime they were not guilty of."

"Suppose they were? From all I've heard, Eddie and some of their men deliberately stampeded Quigley's cattle over the claybanks."

"Do you know, positively, that they did?"

"Not positively, but your father didn't deny it."

"Suppose I could prove he had nothing to do with it?"

"Can you?" Doc Sherman asked.

"I don't know. What did my father say to you before he died?"

"Nothing, Doug. He didn't recover consciousness before he died. He had three wounds through the chest. How he lived as long as he did, I'll never know."

"What about his riders?"

"They're gone from here now. Not a man who rode for your father is still in the basin."

With no warning at all, the front door opened, and Hannah and Marie stood there. Hannah said in a husky whisper, "There are men outside watching the house, Doug. I counted three. If the front is covered the back will be, too."

Doug felt a chill run over his body. He nodded. "Thanks, Hannah."

"What will you do?" Hannah asked.

"He can stay here," Doc Sherman said, hastily. "No one's going to come breaking into my place."

"That's it," Doug said. "I'll stay here for the night. Thanks again, Hannah."

He wouldn't stay here, of course, but the problem now was to get Hannah and Marie away. She seemed satisfied, however, that he would stay. Some of the tension left her body.

She stepped back, closing the door. Doc Sherman walked that way, and locked it, then turned to face Doug. He still looked angry.

"I meant it, Doug. The day hasn't come when Quigley can go so far as to break into my place. You can stay here overnight and not worry about a thing."

Could he? Doug wasn't at all sure of it. And he didn't like being pinned down. Any way you figured it, he was going to have to leave some time, and the longer he delayed, the tighter the net outside could be drawn.

"Any open windows in the house?" he asked abruptly.

"I'm airing one of the west rooms. I had a patient there until this afternoon. Do you think I should close that window?"

"No, I'll close it," Doug said. "You make sure the back door is locked."

DOC SHERMAN nodded and headed that way. Doug crossed to the wing of the house where Sherman's hospital rooms were located. He found the room. He could see the gray outline of the open window and stepped toward it, drawing his gun.

He knelt at the window, staring into the darkness of the night, probing the shadows with his eyes. He could see no sign of any watchers. He climbed swiftly through the window, dropped to the ground outside, and lay there, motionless. He had half expected to hear the crash of gunfire as he hit the ground, but he didn't. Apparently he hadn't been seen.

His eyes were well adjusted to the darkness now, but he still couldn't see anyone. Were there really three men out in front, as Hannah had said? And if so, how had they come here? Who but Irv Cozad had known he was coming here?

Cozad! Doug had left his horse in front of Cozad's, a horse with a brand strange to the basin. And some man, or perhaps several men, had interrupted his talk with the attorney. Those men might have been the ones now out in front. Cozad could have told them where Doug was going.

An angry, booming voice reached him from the street. "Jelbert! Wheatley! Nyatt! Where are you? Come out here where I can see you."

Doug crawled toward the front of the house, still keeping in the deep shadow of the wall. He had a good idea who was out there in the street—Quigley. Flat on his stomach at the front corner of the house, Doug could see him—a bulky, wide-shouldered man, tall, heavy. Two others had come out of the darkness to join him, and now a third man appeared.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the man who must be Quigley asked.

"We thought a lot of Tino Rossi."

"So did I," Quigley snapped. "But just because Tino was fool enough to pull his gun on Callander and get himself shot, we don't have to act like savages and blast a man down from the dark. If you want Callander, face him man by man, one at a time. There's law in the basin. Don't forget it."

One of the three facing Quigley grumbled something, but in a voice too low for Doug to hear. Quigley shrugged. He turned, approached the house, and knocked on the door.

When it was opened he said, "Evening, Doc. Is Doug Callander here?"

"No, he isn't," Sherman answered.

Quigley was silent for a moment, then said, "All right, suit yourself, Doc. But if he is here, or if he comes back, tell him I want to see him. Tell him I said there was no sense in our gunning for each other over something that's past."

He turned and walked back to the street, rejoining the three who were there. He said, "Damn it, I don't like this at all. You've made it look as though we were after Callander. I don't want people to get that idea. What's past is past. I'm willing to forgive and forget. If Callander starts something, that's different. But let him start it."

The four turned down the street toward town. After they were gone, Doug got to his feet and walked in the same direction. He cut across the main street above the bank, then turned down toward Cozad's. His horse was still tied where he had left it, and he saw no one near by. Presumably, if what he had heard Quigley saying were true, he could remount his horse and ride it down the main street in complete safety.

Roger Quigley, since the raid on the Callander ranch, must be concerned with public opinion, with what people thought. He had said that he wanted no more trouble unless it were forced on him. But a thing like that could be arranged very easily. A man could be tricked or driven to the point of starting a fight, then could be smashed down, and blamed for what had happened.

The stars had come out. A half moon brightened the sky. Doug crossed to where his horse was tied, pulled the reins free, and swung into the saddle. He took a blind course out of town and, after passing the last buildings, headed toward the river. Beyond it, he cut across country, heading north and east. The old McAdams ranch, now Quigley's, lay in that direction, and Quigley had said he wanted to see him.

Quigley's ranch house buildings were at the southwest edge of a wide meadow reaching up toward the foothills. A creek ran nearby. It was flanked by willows, and offered Doug Callander a place to tie his horse. He did so, then approached the ranch house on foot. He hadn't wasted any time in getting here, and was fairly sure he was ahead of Quigley and those who had been with him in town.

He climbed the porch and stood at the door listening, but couldn't hear a thing. After a moment he knocked.

"Who is it?" called a voice on the other side of the door, a woman's voice.

Doug mumbled an indistinct answer, hoping it would serve. It did. The door was opened and he saw a woman who must be Fran Quigley looking out at him. She was tall, slender, and beautiful, as Cozad had said. Perhaps she was unhappy; he couldn't tell from her face. A startled, frightened, wide-eyed expression had settled there. She took a step backward, lifting her hand to her throat.

"Who are you?" she asked in a whisper.

"My name's Callander," Doug said. "Maybe you've heard it before."

He stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Callander?" Fran whispered. "You're the one who—"

"Yes, I'm the one who came back," Doug said.

HE STARED at her again, and with a frank interest. She had honey-colored hair which looked as soft as silk. Her eyes were blue and there was a creamy look to her skin. Her dress, a dark blue satin, was cut so low it almost exposed her breasts, came in tight at a narrow waist, flared out over the hips, and was long enough to nearly touch the floor.

"What do you want?" Fran asked.

Doug tried a grin, and when he spoke he deliberately used her first name. "Don't get excited, Fran. I came here only to have a

talk with your husband. I haven't shot a woman in months."

A shaky laugh bubbled from her throat. She straightened a little. She seemed to be making a desperate effort to regain her composure.

"I hear you're from Kansas City," Doug said. "You must find Waggoner and the Stoney River basin pretty tame after K.C."

She almost smiled. "I do—in ways that are important to a woman."

"What do you miss most?"

"The noise and the excitement of the city, I think. And friends to talk to."

"I should have come here long ago."

She laughed with obvious pleasure, color sweeping up into her face. The look of fear was gone from her eyes. They were sparkling now. She understood this kind of bantering talk between a man and woman, and was ready to warm up to it.

"I was in Kansas City two years ago," Doug said. "Wish I had known you then."

"You're a strange man, Mr. Callander. You're not at all as I expected you to be. You don't seem to belong here any more than I do."

"Have you any coffee?"

"I'm afraid it's cold."

"Pour some anyhow. We'll have a drink to the past—and to whatever the future holds."

"Wait here," she said. "I'll be only a minute."

Fran returned with two cups of cold coffee, her skirts making a swishing noise as she came toward him. She handed him one cup, her eyes dancing merrily. They drank the coffee. Doug didn't think it tasted very good.

"I'd give anything to be back in Kansas City," Fran said.

"Why don't you go?"

"I don't have the money."

"What would it take?"

"At least five hundred dollars."

Doug nodded soberly. It occurred to him that he might be able to get five hundred from Cozad. The attorney had offered to put up what he might need. And he could really hurt Quigley if he helped his wife run away, and let Quigley know who was responsible. But as quickly as that thought came to him, Doug put it aside. He hadn't yet come to the point of having to fight through someone else. He hoped he never would.

"If you see five hundred dollars floating around, let me know," Fran said.

"I will." Doug nodded. "And may I have the next dance?"

He stepped toward her, humming, lifting his arms. For an instant he thought she would back away, but she didn't. He slid his left arm around her waist and caught her right hand in his. They started circling the room in a waltz step.

He drew her closer, and abruptly they weren't dancing. His arms were tight around her, and he found her lips alive and demanding. The full pressure of her body was against him, and the pulse of his blood set up a ringing in his ears. Then she broke away and stepped back, her eyes as wide and startled as they had been when she saw him at the door.

He never would know what might have happened. As he stared at her he became aware of the drumming sound of hoofbeats, a sound which quickly grew louder. Quigley and those who had been in town with him were nearing the ranch.

Fran must have heard the sound too, for she jerked a look at the door, then looked at Doug. "You'll have to go—quickly."

He dropped his hands to his sides. "No, Fran. I came here to see them."

The men had reached the yard and were dismounting outside. He could hear the muffled sound of their voices and knew that very soon Quigley and his son would be coming through the front door.

Doug said, "Fran, go to your room."

"No. If I'm here there won't be any shooting."

"But you'll be blamed for not warning them I was here. I know what I'm doing, Fran. Go to your room and get to bed. All I want to do is have a talk with your husband."

She turned away reluctantly. Doug heard the sound of footsteps on the porch. He walked quietly to the highbacked chair that faced away from the door. As he sat down in it, he saw the door to Fran's room closing, and heard the front door open and the sounds of footsteps moving into the room. The outside door banged shut.

Two men had come into the room. Doug

came silently to his feet and turned to face them. "I heard you wanted to see me," he said. "I wanted a chance to talk to you, too, so I came out here."

QUIGLEY was breathing fast. The shock of finding someone here had hit him pretty hard. His son stood slightly to his right, leaning forward a little, his muscles rigid. He was a smaller edition of his father, slightly taller but not yet so heavy. Cozad had called him good looking, and he might have been if he had smiled. Cozad apparently didn't rate him as very dangerous, but it was Doug's guess that Bill Quigley had the same reckless drive as his father.

"I don't have to ask your name, do I?" Quigley said.

Doug shook his head. "No, I imagine you've heard it before."

"I didn't hate your father, Callander. I disagreed with him, opposed him, and fought him, but I didn't hate him."

"You killed him."

"No. I was with the posse the night he was killed, but who fired the bullets that got him, we'll never know."

"Let's talk about that raid for a minute."

"It wasn't a raid," Quigley said sharply. "It was a sheriff's posse that rode to the Callander ranch. Your father refused to recognize its authority; he ordered the men to leave. When the sheriff refused, your father was the one who opened fire."

"Then let's talk about the reason the posse went there," Doug said.

Quigley nodded. He said, "Callander, your father and I disagreed on a good many things, as men sometimes do. We had our arguments, but it never would have amounted to more than that if it hadn't been for the stampede."

"You blamed my father. Why?"

"I had two men night riding that herd. Both of them saw him, and they saw your brother, too, and three men who rode for your father."

"Your men could have lied."

"They didn't. But to make the case more binding, Gabe Pettit knew your father was there that night, and Ham Selig, on his way home, saw your father and his men in the actual act of stampeding the herd. Talk to Ham Selig. He works for Hannah Touissant. Ask him what he said to the sheriff. Now, suppose you put up that gun you're holding. There are a couple of other things I want to talk to you about. I don't talk well when there's a gun pointed at me."

Quigley doesn't want to start anything here, Doug thought; it wouldn't look good. If I'm to be killed, he'd rather handle it somewhere else, and make it seem as though I started the fight. He'd like outside witnesses, too.

Doug shrugged, holstered his gun, and said, "Go ahead, Quigley. What is it?"

"Why did you come back to the basin?" Quigley asked.

"I heard my father and brother were killed. Under the same circumstances, wouldn't you have come back?"

Quigley drew a cigar from his pocket. He bit off the end, lit it, and nodded. "Yes, I probably would have done just what you did," he admitted. "Well, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to stay here and run the Callander ranch."

Quigley frowned. "I'd like to buy that land. Your father had good range. I'll pay a good price for it."

"But it's not for sale."

"You really mean that?"

Up to now Quigley had seemed rather pleasant, but his attitude was changing. The color in his face was growing darker. His eyes had hardened.

"You're making a mistake, Callander. You're going to correct it. Before you leave here you're going to make up your mind to sell me your ranch."

Bill Quigley had straightened, and now was smiling. He hadn't liked or approved of what he had been hearing, but this last statement his father had made struck him just right. He rubbed his hands together and nodded.

A cold knot made itself felt in Doug's stomach. He still had his gun; he could whip it up in an instant. But Quigley and his son were too widely separated to be covered at the same time. If it came to the point of using a gun, Doug was neatly boxed.

"I'll tell you what you're going to do, Callander," Quigley continued. "You're going

to sign a paper tonight, agreeing to sell me your ranch. We'll conclude the deal tomorrow, in town. And the next day you're going to leave this country."

Doug moistened his lips. He thought, here it is, out in the open. I sign an unofficial bill of sale tonight, they keep me here, and tomorrow I ride into Waggoner with Quigley and make the sale legal. Then I pull out of the basin, and to everyone here it seems as though I'm satisfied. That will strengthen Quigley's position in the community. But to hell with that. What can they do if I don't sign? Quigley doesn't want a fight if he can avoid it. If he can't avoid it, he wants to put me in the wrong before there's any more trouble.

HE CONSIDERED that for a moment, then shook his head. "I'll sign nothing."

Quigley looked at his son. He said, "Bill, go get Eli Jelbert and Chuck Wheatley. No, call them from the door. Keep your hand on your gun, and your eye on Callander."

"Now you're talking sense," Bill said.

He crossed to the door and opened it. He shouted for Jelbert and Wheatley, but kept looking back into the room.

"You might as well unbuckle your gun belt and drop it," Quigley said. "You're not going to get to use it."

Doug made no comment to that, but stood waiting. He heard footsteps on the porch Bill Quigley moved back into the room, followed by the two men he had called. One was tall, thin and had a tight scowl on his face. The other, shorter and chunky, wore a ragged reddish mustache.

"Look who we have here," Bill said. "His name's Callander. He's the man who shot Tino Rossi."

The man with the mustache drew his gun. The other one took a quick, angry step forward.

"These are two friends of Tino Rossi's," Quigley said. "They thought a lot of Rossi."

"He pulled a gun on me," Doug said bleakly.

"I know he did," Quigley answered. "Carl Schinn cleared you with the sheriff, although why I'll never know, and it makes little difference. You're still the man who killed Rossi. Before the night's over you'll wish you hadn't met him. Jelbert, Wheatley, take him out to the barn, but don't do anything until I get there. I want to see if Fran's all right. Callander, unbuckle your gun belt and drop it."

Doug unbuckled and dropped his gun belt; he had no other choice in the matter. Jelbert and Wheatley came up to where he was standing. They grabbed his wrists, and hustled him to the door, then across the yard to the barn. They weren't very gentle about it.

Doug lay on the ground well inside the barn door. A stinging blow on the head had sent him there. Bill Quigley, Jelbert, and Wheatley stood above him, waiting for the arrival of Roger Quigley.

Quigley came in and Bill turned to him. "Is Fran all right?"

"She's asleep," Quigley said. He stepped forward and looked down at Doug. "Ready to sign the papers I want?"

Doug shook his head. "Never."

Quigley stepped back again. He said, "Go ahead, Wheatley, Jelbert. There's the man who shot Tino Rossi. Work him over, but don't hurt him too much. I want him to be able to sign a paper in the morning."

A boot lashed out and caught Doug in the side. It whipped out at him again. and he caught it and came erect, jerking up Wheatley's leg and shoving. Wheatley reeled backward, off balance, shouting. Doug whirled around to face Jelbert. A fist scraped his jaw, then another smashed him in the stomach, doubling him over. He lunged straight ahead, falling against the man and carrying him to the ground.

Doug rolled over and came to his feet, ducking under a wild swinging blow Wheatley had aimed at him. He ripped a fist into Wheatley's face, then struck him again. But by this time Jelbert was on his feet once more and had closed in on him, and Bill had decided to take a part in the fight and was chopping at him with his fists.

He heard Quigley start shouting at the men, "That's enough! That's enough! Stand back!" Then he heard him say, "Callander? Can you hear me, Callander?"

Doug tried to answer, but wasn't sure whether or not he did.

"Will you sign the paper, Callander?"

He tried to shake his head.

Quigley started swearing. He broke it off to say, "Tie him up and let him lie here until morning. And I mean just that. He's your responsibility, Jelbert. See that he's here in the morning, and see that he's alive."

They tied him, and all but Jelbert left the barn. Doug's body throbbed from the beating he had taken. He knew he was going to have to take more of this in the morning, and was afraid he couldn't last through it. No man could. No price was worth it.

"Jelbert?" he whispered hoarsely. "Jelbert?"

"Shut up," Jelbert answered. "If I get up and come over there, I'll kick your face in. And do you know why? Not because your name's Callander. It's because you killed Rossi, who was ten times as fine a man as any you'll ever know."

Doug lay silent.

"He was a man full of laughs," Jelbert continued. "There was never a dull moment around the bunkhouse when Rossi was there. He played the guitar. He could sing, too. And he was no slouch at work; he carried his share of the load. You could have killed any one of us and not stirred us up like killing Rossi did. Let me tell you more about him."

HE WENT on talking, but Doug didn't listen to what he was saying. He thought, if I sign Quigley's paper in the morning, they'll clean me up, take me to town, and let me make it official. Then one of these men, on account of Rossi, will take a crack at me with his gun. So any way I figure it, I lose.

He struggled with that problem for a time, heard a sudden thud, realized that Jelbert had stopped talking in the middle of a sentence, and turned his head to look that way.

Doug's eyes widened. "Fran!"

The woman stood back of the box on which Jelbert had been seated. A chunk of firewood was in her hands. Jelbert had spilled forward to the ground and lay there on his face, motionless.

"You'll have to get away, quickly," she whispered. "In another hour it'll be dawn. I'll get you a horse."

"I've a horse in the trees down by the creek," Doug answered.

Fran turned away and, from the wall of the barn, brought a harness knife. It took her only a moment to cut the ropes around his wrists and legs. He noticed that her hands were trembling, and when she stood up she looked around again at Jelbert.

Doug stood up, and Fran started urging him to the door. A wave of dizziness swept over him. He closed his eyes, then opened them and stared across the yard toward the creek. It was still too dark to see more than the outline of the trees bordering it, and it wasn't far away, but he didn't know whether or not he could cover the distance.

"I'll help you to where you left your horse," Fran said.

"No, you stay here. And Fran—brush out your footprints in the barn."

She turned back into the barn. Doug leaned against the frame of the doorway, grateful for its support. His mind seemed to be clearing up a little. As soon as it was discovered that he was gone, Quigley's men would come pounding after him. He could count on that positively. They would trail him to where he had left his horse, then follow the tracks of his horse.

But if he seemed headed for the road for town, they might not pay too close attention to the trail his horse would leave. They might drive for Waggoner as swiftly as they could get there.

Fran returned to where he was standing. "I don't think anyone will guess I was in there," she whispered.

"They'll know someone was," Doug said. "Jelbert will remember the blow on his head when he wakes up."

"He's had trouble with several of the newer men Roger's hired. He won't think to blame me for what happened."

"Then get back in the house quietly."

"Where will you go?"

"I'm not sure."

"Don't stay in the basin, Doug."

He said, "Thanks, Fran," and started across the yard.

He walked like a drunken man, weaving toward his horse, and how he managed to pull himself into the saddle he didn't know. Twinging pains were in every part of his body. He headed for the road and held to it for

a mile in the direction of Waggoner. Then, where the grass was high, he cut over to the creek and turned back up it, walking his horse through the water.

The first light of a new morning was in the sky when he passed Quigley's ranch buildings. In another half hour everyone would be up, and almost immediately it would be discovered that he was gone.

Within a short time someone was sure to trail him to the place under the trees where he had left his horse, and would follow the tracks of his horse to the road. If he were lucky then, Quigley's entire crew would go pushing off to town after him, and it might be afternoon before they figured out what he actually had done.

He rode on up the creek. His body was a mass of pain. He didn't know where he was going. He knew he had to work out some plan, but he couldn't. He realized, after a time, that he was well above the Quigley ranch, climbing up the bench toward the mountains.

Toward noon, he reined up. Off to the right, in a circle of the hills, were the sprawling buildings of the Touissant ranch. Something Roger Quigley had said came back to him now. Quigley had said, "Talk to Ham Selig. He works for Hannah Touissant. Ask him what he said to the sheriff." Doug angled toward the road and followed it to the Touissant ranch.

He was half doubled up over the saddle when he rode into the yard, and when he pulled up, his body swayed from side to side. Hannah Loring—she must be Hannah Touissant now—came out on the porch. Two men and a boy of about fourteen showed up in the barn door.

Doug made an effort to hold himself erect. He touched his hat and called, "Hello, Hannah," and then he dismounted.

When his feet touched the ground his knees caved in under him and he fell. His head suddenly was swimming. He heard Hannah shouting something to the men, and a moment later realized she had hurried to the yard and was kneeling at his side.

It was strange how much better he felt after some good food and several cups of steaming black coffee. He sat at the kitchen table, steady for the first time that day. His muscles were still sore, his head throbbed, one side of his face was swollen, and whenever he moved his shoulders he had a stabbing pain in the side, probably from a cracked rib. But he definitely was stronger, steadier.

SELIG came in from the yard. He was a stooped, aging man with the gray stubble of a beard on his face. "They'll be here before the day's over," he said, referring to Quigley's crowd. "That horse of yours has a toed-out right front shoe. It makes an easy trail to follow. I told José to ride him up through the foothills and to swing back into the basin south of here, then turn him loose along the Stoney River. José can catch a ride from there to Waggoner. I'll pick him up in Waggoner in a day or two."

"Thanks, Ham," Doug said. Then he added, "I'd like to ask you a question or two about the stampede."

"I don't know anything about it."

"Quigley said you had made a statement to the sheriff."

The man shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I did, only I didn't say anything about the stampede."

"What did you say?"

"I admitted I saw your father and Eddie and three of their men cutting across country from the direction of the claybanks at about midnight on the night of the stampede."

"They could have been coming from somewhere else."

Selig shook his head. "It's not likely. The claybanks are only a few miles south and east of here. Where I saw your father and Eddie and the three men was in a direct line from the claybanks to the Callander ranch. I was coming up the road from town."

"It wasn't like my father to fight a man by stampeding his cattle. If he had gone after Quigley with his guns, I could understand it; but not this other thing. It just doesn't fit my father's character."

"You've heard he didn't deny it."

"Yes. But I still can't believe he would deliberately stampede fifteen hundred head of cattle over a cliff."

Ham Selig turned toward the door. "Do you want me any more, Hannah?"

Hannah said, "No. But if you see Mr. Quigley riding this way, call me. I'll handle him."

Ham Selig shrugged and went outside.

"More coffee?" Hannah asked.

Doug nodded. "Where's Marie?"

"She has a playhouse in the barn. Elena's with her. Elena is José's mother. Juan Moreno, his father, helps out here on the ranch."

She poured his coffee.

"Tell me about your husband," Doug said. "You married Andre Touissant, didn't you?"

"Yes, but he was killed three years ago when he was thrown from his horse. I could have sold the ranch, I suppose; I could still sell it. Mr. Quigley made me an offer only a few months ago. But I'd rather live here and run the place than move back to town."

"I'm sorry about Andre," Doug said.

He remembered him quite clearly, a tall, quiet, soft-spoken man who must have been several years older than Hannah.

"It hasn't been easy without him," Hannah said. "I've had to learn to ride and rope, just like a man. I'm afraid I'm still not very good, but Ham Selig has been an excellent teacher, and very patient. The worst of it is that I've had to be away from Marie so much. Actually, Elena has been more her mother than I have."

"You could have married again."

She smiled faintly. "I've thought of that, but not seriously."

She turned abruptly from the stove and came toward him. "Why did you come back to the basin, Doug? Your father boasted you had a good job in Wyoming."

"I had a letter from someone in town, telling me of the death of my father and brother—and warning me to stay away. I wanted to find out exactly what had happened."

"Suppose you learn your father and Eddie started the stampede? What then?"

He shook his head. He hadn't faced such a possibility. He couldn't consider it now.

Ham Selig came to the door and looked in. "They're coming," he reported.

"Tell Elena to stay with Marie and keep out of sight in the barn," Hannah said. "You stay in the barn, too, Ham."

Doug came to his feet. He stepped toward the door.

"No, you wait here," Hannah said. "I'll send them away."

THERE were seven in the group which rode into the yard. Quigley wasn't with them, nor was Eli Jelbert or Chuck Wheatley. But Bill Quigley was there, and he seemed to be in charge. He reined in close to the porch and pulled off his hat.

He called, "Morning, Hannah. You look as beautiful as usual. Where's Doug Callander?"

"You can see the tracks of his horse leading off toward the hills," Hannah answered.

Bill motioned to one of the men with him, calling, "Vic, take a look." Then he stared back at Hannah. "What time did he get here?"

"A little after noon," Hannah said.

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to know if I knew anything about the stampede. I told him I didn't."

Vic, who had wheeled his horse out of the yard to the north, came riding back. "The trail leads on toward the hills, Bill," he called. "I don't figure he can be more than an hour or two ahead of us."

"All right, chase after him," Bill ordered. "I'll catch up with you in a few minutes."

Those who had come here with him reined away, heading north, several grinning as they rode off, apparently understanding why Bill was in no hurry. And Bill was grinning as he looked at Hannah.

"I thought you might invite me in for coffee," he suggested.

"Tie your horse to the corral fence," Hannah answered. "I'll warm up the coffee."

She turned back into the house, and was frowning as she came through the door. "You can wait in there, Doug," she said, pointing to her bedroom. "And no matter what happens, stay in there."

"I don't like hiding," Doug growled.

Hannah stiffened, angrily. "Did I ask you to come here? I didn't. And I don't like any part of what's happening. I don't like hiding a man in my bedroom, or having to lie to Bill Quigley, but there seems to be nothing else to do. Now get in there and be quiet."

Doug walked to the bedroom door. He opened it, then looked back. He said, "Sorry, Hannah."

She was at the stove, shaking out the fire. She didn't glance around or answer him. He heard Bill's footsteps on the porch and stepped quickly into the bedroom, closing the door. But he didn't close it tightly; he left it open a crack.

"You'll have to hurry if you're going to catch up with the others," Hannah was saying to Bill.

"Maybe I won't worry about that. If we don't catch Callander, he'll come to us."

"And is that important?"

"Dad thinks it is. He wants to get everything straightened out. In a way, I do, too. You'll like the Callander ranch, Hannah."

"I like this one," Hannah said.

It was silent for a moment after that. Then Hannah's voice cried, "Bill! Don't! Stop it!"

"Now don't be like that," Bill answered. "You know how I feel about you."

Doug heard the sound of a slap, the noise of a scuffle, and then Bill's voice, raised angrily. "Damn it, Hannah, I'll teach you a thing or two."

Although Doug couldn't see into the front room, he didn't have to. He knew exactly what was happening. And he waited no longer. Pulling open the door, he lunged toward Bill and Hannah. They stood near the table, struggling. As Doug stepped into sight, Bill thrust the girl aside and clawed at his holster, whipping up his gun.

He was off balance, and he fired too soon. The bullet smashed into the floor as Doug was driving forward. Bill had no opportunity for another shot. Doug's fist, curving upward, caught him squarely in the face with all the weight of his body behind it. A follow-up blow ripped into his side.

He staggered backward, fell across the table, and rolled from there to the floor. He made no effort to get up; he couldn't have. There was a glazed and uncomprehending look in his eyes.

"Why didn't you stay in the bedroom?" Hannah demanded. "Don't you think I've learned how to handle men like Bill? What am I going to do now?"

"Throw him out," Doug answered.

"And have him ride back to his father with word that I was hiding you here? You haven't made it any easier for me."

Ham Selig came bursting in from the barn, his gun in his hand. He stared at Bill's figure, then looked up at Doug and Hannah.

"Get his horse," Doug said. "Bring it up to the porch."

But Hannah shook her head. "May I give the orders in my own house, please? Ham, I want you to saddle a horse for Mr. Callander."

Ham Selig turned back into the yard. Bill's eyes blinked. He groaned, rolled over, and sat up. He touched his face. It was beginning to swell. He looked up at Doug, glanced at Hannah, then looked at Doug again.

"I'll not forget this, Callander," he said thickly. "I'll not forget your part in it, either," he continued, staring at Hannah. "So Callander rode north, did he? North to your bedroom!" He stood up and leaned against the table. He saw his gun lying there, reached for it, and picked it up.

"It's unloaded," Doug said. "Don't load it again until you're away from here."

BILL dropped the gun into his holster. "It'll be loaded when we meet again," he said angrily. Then he turned toward the door, but stopped as he got there. "I'll be back—tomorrow, maybe, Hannah."

"Don't trouble yourself," Hannah said.

Doug stepped forward. "Wait, I'll ride with you. I'm leaving too."

"So you can shoot me in the back after we get away from here?" Bill asked.

"I don't have a gun," Doug answered, "and your gun's empty."

Bill's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He said, "All right, Callander. I'll ride with you for a couple of miles."

Doug followed Bill Quigley outside. Ham Selig was at the corral, saddling a horse. They headed that way together.

"If you have no gun, I won't load mine," Bill said. "What's on your mind, Callander? Where are we going?"

"We're heading for Pettit's. I want to ask Pettit what he knows about the stampede."

They headed south and east. To Doug it wasn't an easy ride. There was still a throbbing ache in his head, and the twitching pains in his body hadn't gone away. A few miles from Hannah's he reined up, to fill and light his pipe while Bill rolled a cigarette.

"This is a crazy thing to be doing, riding with you," Bill said uneasily.

"We have some talking to do."

"What about?"

"The Callander ranch. I'll never sell it, Bill."

"A dead man doesn't have much to say about things like that."

Doug said, "I didn't have a gun when we left the house. I didn't think I'd have one when we rode away. But this is my own saddle on a borrowed horse. I've an extra gun and gun belt in one of the saddle bags. I can get it out and buckle it on while you load up. Shall we settle things here and now, Bill? Shall we get it over with?"

Bill Quigley's hand swept back suddenly to whip out his gun. He broke it, fingered his belt for bullets. Doug twisted around, bent over, dug his hand into his saddle bag. His extra gun was where he had left it, and he sat up, straightening to face Bill, the gun leveled directly at him.

Bill's gun was broken for loading. Several shells already had been shoved into its cylinder. A snap could close it, but Bill didn't snap the gun shut. He didn't seem able to. His hands started shaking. A shocked frightened look was in his eyes, and perspiration glistened on his forehead.

A hoarse cry broke from his throat. "You didn't give me a chance!"

"Snap you gun shut, Bill," Doug said quietly. "Whip it up. I'm waiting for you."

Bill tried to speak, but couldn't. A shudder ran over his body. The gun he was holding slid from his hands. It bounced against his leg and fell to the ground. He looked down at it; then, jerking the reins of his horse, he wheeled away and started racing off across country, doubled low over the saddle.

Doug watched him out of sight. He knew Bill Quigley would never forgive him for what had happened here today, and he knew it was only half a man who was riding away. The other half remained here, where he had dropped his gun.

Doug dismounted, picked up the gun Bill had dropped, and rode on. He made it to the Pettit ranch by late afternoon, but the place was deserted and he didn't feel he should wait for Pettit to show up. Bill had known he was coming here and, if he found any men at his home, would be leading them in this direction.

It was an hour's ride from the Pettit ranch to the point where Stoney River curved west. Doug headed that way, not at all sure what his next step should be. Exactly where did he stand in the basin? Right now, he was a fugitive from Roger Quigley. If Quigley could get his hands on him out here in the open country, Doug might not last long. But what would Quigley's attitude be in town? It might be different. It was going to be interesting to find out.

(To be continued in the next issue)

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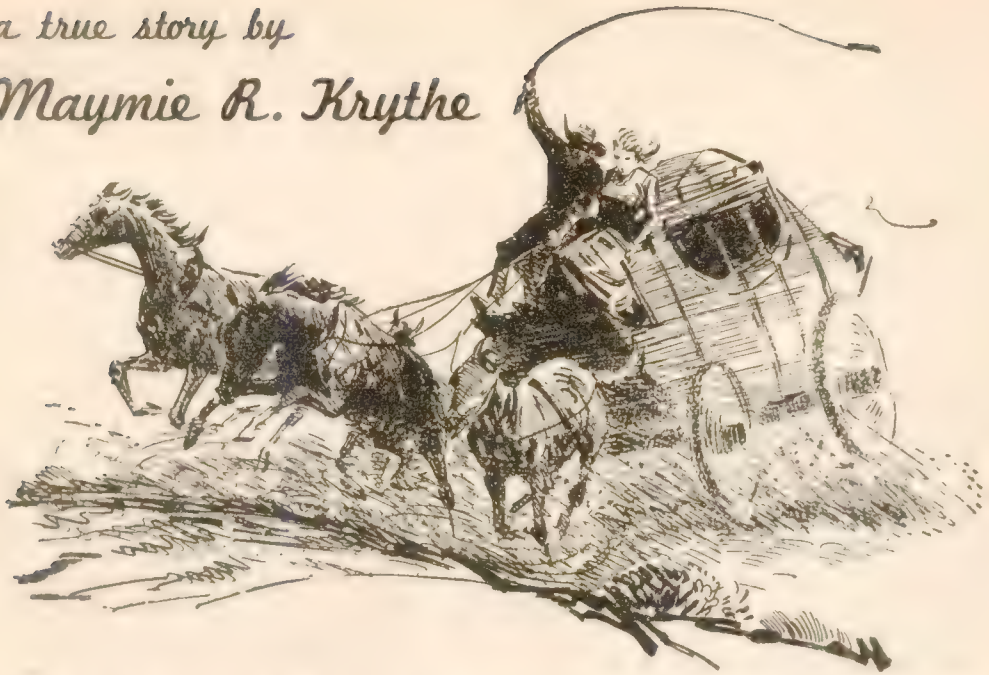
a true story by

Maymie R. Krythe



When California Women Rode in Stagecoaches

WHEN stages were the chief means of transportation in California, many women passengers traveled the rough mountain roads, enduring the same dangers and discomforts as men did. Some of these daring ladies had made the hard long overland journey to the Pacific Coast to join their husbands, who had come West to make their fortunes during the Gold Rush.

Many wives crossed the fever-infested Isthmus of Panama, riding part of the way in native boats, or on muleback, while others spent months in sailing vessels on the long tiresome trip from the Atlantic Coast round stormy Cape Horn.

These pioneer women traveled in California in all kinds of stages, from the uncomfortable "mud wagons" to the fine Abbot and Downing coaches, imported from New England. These vehicles, with their graceful Concord bodies, swung on stout leather thoroughbraces, made traveling somewhat easier.

Besides the poor food and lodging places en route, the women, during the dry season, had to endure the clouds of dust, sometimes so thick that it filled their eyes and ears and almost suffocated them. Their clothes, too, were much the worse after such harrowing experiences.

As many California bridges couldn't be trusted with heavy loads, passengers often had to pile out and carry their own baggage across the stream. It was really hard on feminine nerves, too, to see the bridge sway as

the coach slowly crawled across it. It was customary, too, on steep mountain roads, for everyone, including the women, to alight. The men helped push the stage up the grade. It's no wonder that travelers complained of the exorbitant prices charged by stage companies, especially when, in addition, patrons often had to work their passage in this way.

One incident that has come down through history will illustrate some of the hazards feminine passengers experienced.

Late one night in the 1850's, a woman and her little daughter climbed down wearily from a stage in Sacramento. Both were covered with scratches and bruises; their clothes were torn and stained. During their forty-mile ride, with nine Chinese coolies as the other occupants of the stage, the coach had suddenly overturned and rolled down an embankment. The mother, her child, and the Orientals all were thrown around inside the stage. The Chinese, in their strange language, yelled at the tops of their voices, nearly frightening the lady and the little girl to death.

Finally, even though the driver was hurt. he managed to get the vehicle into Sacramento. The woman and her child, nearer dead than alive, stayed in town a few days to recover from the shock—before going on, undaunted, to their destination.

On this next stage of their journey, one dark night in Cahuenga Pass, near Hollywood, the horses slipped off the road. The coach turned over, killing the driver. The woman and the other passengers were rescued with much difficulty.

Accidents often happened when stages had to ford swollen rivers; and more than one lady in her voluminous skirts was fished out, dripping wet, by some gallant male passenger, and deposited on the bank of the stream.

A bad piece of luck came to a troupe of actors, when the trunk containing their costumes and stage properties fell from the boot of the stage as they were crossing a river. The unhappy players saw their trunk break open on the rocks below. The rushing waters soon carried their precious possessions out of sight.

During Gold Rush days, one theatrical company was traveling by stage to put on their show in a mining camp. Suddenly three masked men jumped out from the bushes and held up the coach. There was a strong box under the driver's feet, but the bandits became very angry when they found it was empty.

Since the players had no money, the desperadoes decided they'd have something, at least, for their trouble. At gun point, they forced the troupe to put on an impromptu show for them. There, in the dusty road, the frightened thespians entertained the road agents with varied numbers: dancing, singing and banjo playing. The ventriloquist performed, too, and the comedian told his funniest stories.

To end the party in style, the bandits made the women dance with them, while the men furnished the music. At last the coach was allowed to go on. The driver whipped up his horses, and dashed away. But before he had gone very far, he fainted dead away; for, inside the coach, he had hidden a bag containing several thousands of dollars worth of gold dust that the desperadoes hadn't discovered.

A well-known pair of pioneer actors, Mr. and Mrs. Bates (parents of the actress Blanche Bates) had many hardships when traveling by stage through the Sierras and on into Nevada. But their theatrical company gave great pleasure to countless drama-hungry miners. Once, during a heavy snowstorm, two of the stage horses gave out; but at last the other pair managed to pull the coach into town.

During the whole of this ordeal, Mrs. Bates was carrying a small child in her arms. But that evening she and the other hardy troupers put on a full-length show—a tragedy, followed by the humorous after-piece which was always expected by the audiences in those days.

Sometimes women passengers had to put up with the quarrels of men travelers. At times, in the narrow confines of the stages, shots were exchanged by angry men; and some travelers were disposed of permanently during these fights. So the ladies of the crinoline period certainly took their lives in their hands when they used this pioneer method of transportation.

In the *Sacramento Union* for May 11, 1859, there is an account of a child's birth in a stagecoach. The mother, one of four women travelers, was on her way to San Jose when she decided that discretion was the better part of valor. So she asked the driver to stop. At once he told the two men passengers, both French, to leave the coach. At first they refused, saying they'd paid for their seats and didn't intend to get out and walk. But finally they agreed, after much urging. After a baby boy had arrived, the driver took the mother and child to a hotel. Apparently no harm resulted to either by reason of this unique birthplace.

Some intrepid pioneer women even "handled the ribbons" themselves, in spite of the various dangers connected with stage driving. One very courageous California whip was Belle Rawson. No doubt the news that she was a crack shot reached the ears of road agents, for it is said that no bandit ever tried to hold her up.

In early California times there were also some females who tried their luck at robbing coaches. For instance, Dutch Kate, (after losing $2,000 at cards in Marysville) and two men assistants, planned to hold up the Forest City stage. They had heard that a gold dust buyer named Nichols was to be aboard, with $15,000 worth of the valuable metal.

Kate ordered the driver to pass down the box. He did so at once, knowing it wasn't healthy to refuse such a demand. Then the coach was permitted to proceed. Dutch Kate and her confederates must have been disgusted when they found that the box was empty.

Later they learned that Nichols had taken the treasure through safely by keeping the bag hidden beneath his seat.

Nowadays, as one speeds along California's smooth highways, it is hard to imagine what traveling in stagecoaches over the rough trails in the early days was like. But, unquestionably, it was more difficult, uncomfortable, and downright dangerous, and there were many unsung heroines among the women travelers in the old West.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Which of these places were named for cattle trail drivers, which for frontier scouts: Ft. Bridger, Wyo., Loving, N.M., Goodnight, Tex., and Kit Carson, Colo.?

2. Mt. Whitney, highest peak in the U.S. proper, is in California, in what national park?

3. What animal, whether rightly or wrongly, did oldtime cowhands consider especially dangerous as a carrier of rabies (hydrophobia)?

4. The dictionary says "to snub" means "to slight or ignore intentionally," but what do cowboys mean by "snubbing?"

5. The Mimbrenos, Chiricahuas, Tontos and Mescaleros were branches of what warlike Indian tribe of the Southwest?

6. Bob Ford, slayer of Jesse James, was shot and killed by Ed O'Kelly in his own saloon honkytonk in what riproaring mining camp in Colorado?

7. What does a cowboy do when he "lets a horse soak awhile?"

8. The low brush commonly called "shinnery" in the Southwest belongs to what well known species of trees?

9. Mark Twain, the famous humorist, once swung a pick as a laborer in the silver mines at a riproaring boom town called Aurora, now a "ghost town," in what state?

10. The notorious outlaw, Sam Bass, so the old ballad about him states, "was born in Indiana, and then began to roam." He was killed at Round Rock, in what Southwestern state?

——*Rattlesnake Robert.*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 91. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Gunlaw Town

By RAY G. ELLIS

HE WAS at the door to his office, on his way out, when Cathy Rhodes spoke. He turned and looked at her, a bit of a smile touching his mouth.

"Ward, be careful." She came toward him and rested a hand on his arm. "Remember old Bill Rollins. He wasn't right for weeks after you knocked him out for causing trouble over at the saloon."

His smile widened to a grin. He said, "But Bill doesn't drink anymore, Cathy—at least not in Plainview."

She returned his smile, but there was still pleading in her eyes. "I don't want to interfere in your job, you know that. Only sometimes I think you're too tough on people. You can't expect them to be perfect."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll bow and ask them to please accompany me to the jailhouse," he told her wryly, and they both laughed.

He went on into the street, squinting against the glare of the sun. This was his town, for he was Marshal Ward Cousin and the law for fifty miles in any direction. Some thought he ruled with an iron fist, but he preferred to think that it was only a firm hand.

There was chalky gray at his temples. His face was dark from the sun, almost leathery. It wasn't particularly pleasant, being the face of a man who was as hard on himself as he was on anybody else.

His thoughts dwelled on Cathy Rhodes as he crossed the street. He was in love with her—he didn't try to fool himself about that—and sometimes he felt like a kid again. She was twenty-two, just barely a woman, and he couldn't believe that she could possibly love him, a man of forty.

It worried him sometimes, for he thought that he must surely be too old for her. And he wasn't alone in thinking that. The women of the town thought it was shameful, and some of the men were beginning to cast knowing glances at him whenever he drew near. The women he didn't mind, but the action of the men bothered him, for he knew what was in their minds.

He stepped onto the walk and into the shade of the overhanging awning. From over the batwings came the sound of loud voices. He put thoughts of Cathy out of his mind and shoved through the doors.

This was the Prairie Saloon. He had been told that the two strangers who had entered

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MARSHAL COUSIN'S HARSH CODE made no allowances for weakness . . . a thief was a thief, even though it was his own son

town only a few short hours ago were drinking heavily and threatening to cause trouble. He had only gotten a fleeting glimpse of the men as they rode past the office and, at that time, had recognized neither of them.

The young one, who couldn't possibly be over nineteen, was nearer the door. His face was flushed with his drinking. His eyes were bright now, but Ward knew that with a few more drinks he would have trouble focusing. The two stood a little apart from the rest of the men at the bar, and that told Cousin something else. They had been belligerent, and the others had moved off in an attempt to keep away from trouble.

Ward walked on down the bar toward them. The youth caught sight of the star on his vest. He waved a glass that was partly full of whisky in front of him and said, "Hey, Britt, look who's here."

At the name, Ward started. The man behind the youth stepped out, a crooked smile on his lips. He studied Ward with narrowed eyes for a short time, and the lawman returned the stare.

"Britt," Ward said softly, his eyes taking

in the thin mustache, the pale face, the light blue eyes that were always just a little bloodshot from late hours and bad whisky.

"Britt Harker," the man said quickly.

Ward nodded, accepting the name. For a moment more they looked at each other, and then Ward remembered what he had come for.

He said, "This is a quiet town, Britt; I keep it that way. I think you've had enough to drink."

Britt's smile widened, and he chuckled. "The marshal's lost some of his sass in his old age. How many men was it you killed down in Dodge and Ellsworth and Wichita?"

"Don't push me, Britt," Ward said flatly.

He turned and went back out onto the street. As soon as the doors swung closed behind him he heard the buzz of voices break out inside. They had expected him to make short work of the two strangers, as he had done with all other troublemakers who came to Plainview.

All right, let them talk and speculate. The totally unexpected sight of Britt had been so startling that it had taken something out of him. He drew tobacco and paper from a pocket in his vest and rolled a cigarette. When he had it going he recrossed the street and stepped into his office, lost in thought. Cathy had left and he was glad for that, for he needed time to think.

MARIE HARKER arrived the next day on the stage from the eastern part of the state. Ward was on hand in front of the hotel, as always, because it was part of his job to check on new arrivals.

He stood well back from the crowd, leaning against the wooden front of the hotel, smoking. The Concord came down the street, followed by a choking cloud of dust. When it pulled to a stop at the hotel, the dust cloud engulfed it and the crowd for a minute, and there was coughing and cursing.

A drummer with a sample case got off first. As soon as he was on the ground he began to beat the dust from his clothes. Two other men got off, and then the woman came to the door. She had been unseen until that time. The noise in the crowd subsided to a whisper as the men studied her, trying to place her in their social structure.

Ward stiffened. He recognized her immediately, although she had changed considerably from the way she had been when he knew her. She saw him at the same time.

"Ward Cousin," she shouted over the heads of the crowd, her voice sounding a bit raspy.

Hurriedly, she climbed down and made her way through the path opening between them. He was unprepared for her enthusiastic greeting, and stood dumbly as she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

She said, "Don't you know me?"

"Of course I recognize you, Marie," he said, when she drew away again. He was conscious of the stares of the crowd, and felt the blood rush to his face.

This was the same Marie, he thought, looking at her, but she had changed. The softness was gone, replaced by a harshness of features and a coarseness of voice. But he was remembering her as she had been twenty years ago. After all, he wasn't the same, either.

"Whenever you're done staring, let's go some place where we can talk," she said, the words carrying in the still air.

Years ago she could have said that and brought laughter, but now there was only silence behind them. He said, "Later, Marie. You go on into the hotel or wherever you're staying. You know Britt's here."

She nodded and he turned away, walking toward his office. A few minutes after he got there Cathy came in, having left Gus Sloman's dry goods store next door, where she worked.

She was a dark-haired girl with large dark eyes. She stood six inches under Ward's six feet and was well-proportioned, not thin but filled out. She glowed with life and sparkling health. Her eyes danced with mischief as she crossed the room.

"Well, Mr. Cousin, that was quite a greeting you got from the lady. I saw it from the doorway of the store. Is she something out of your hidden past?"

The question, though put in a joking manner, hit home, and Ward found himself without words. She studied him, the smile still on her lips.

"She really did something to you," Cathy joked. "You're speechless."

"All right. Lay off," he said shortly. "I used to know her, that's all."

"I'm sorry, Ward," she said contritely. "I was just kidding."

"Okay, okay, just let it alone, will you?"

The first sign of worry came into her eyes. If he had noticed it, perhaps he would have seen that she, too, was not sure of their love. She was just as conscious of the difference in their ages as he was.

She went to the door of the office, then looked at him once more before she went out. But his thoughts were far away, and he was not aware of her going. Nor was he aware of the uneasiness he had created in her.

The next day, late in the afternoon, Gus Sloman sauntered into the office, ostensibly to chew the fat but actually to tell Ward how to run his office. Sloman was one of the councilmen of Plainview, and he took a fatherly attitude toward the people of the town.

Cousin recognized the look on the storekeeper's face but it did not bring his usual smile. This would be about Marie and Britt and the youth, and Ward didn't want to hear it.

After the usual greeting, Sloman cleared his throat and said, "They're at it again, Ward, over in the saloon."

"Who's at it again?" Ward asked, knowing perfectly well who Gus was talking about, and knowing that Gus knew he knew.

"Now, that's no attitude to take," Gus said. He settled his large bulk into a chair and lit a cigar. When his head was surrounded by a cloud of blue smoke, he added, "We've always had a quiet town here, thanks to you, Ward. Now I'm worried about those two men."

Ward sniffed and told him, "Last week you were telling me I was too rough. Now you're giving me hell because I don't throw two men into jail, even though they've done nothing wrong yet."

"That was last week."

"And this is this week. I'm running this office until the day I'm fired. I'll take care of Britt Harker and that punk kid the way I see fit."

The words had come hot and heavy, and they took Gus Sloman by surprise. It showed on his face as it grew red under the onslaught. He shoved out of the chair.

"I don't know what's come over you, Cousin, but don't forget that you're the only law we have here. The way I get it, you know this Britt Harker, and you know his wife, Marie. From the way she greeted you yesterday I'd say you knew her pretty well."

Ward's knuckles whitened on the arms of his chair. He ground out, "What's that supposed to mean, Sloman?"

BEFORE the fat storekeeper could answer, the door came open. The light inside silhouetted Marie. She sensed the tension immediately, and stood hesitantly in the doorway.

Sloman turned and looked at her for a moment, then said, "I'll be going now."

Ward nodded with a quick movement. Sloman walked past Marie, pulling the door closed behind him. Marie and Ward looked at each other, and the years slipped away between them. He saw a raven-haired girl with dancing, sparkling eyes, full of life.

Almost as if he were propelled by some unseen force, he rose from his chair and went toward her. "Marie," he said in a husky voice.

She came to him. For some time he held her close, with neither of them speaking. Finally her voice came, muffled against his chest.

"It's been terrible," she said. "I made an awful mistake, Ward."

Her words brought him back to the present. When he dropped his arms from her and looked into her face, he saw that the raven hair had streaks of gray in it, and the dancing eyes were tired, with tiny crows' feet at the edges.

"What happened to Ted?" he asked. The question was put hesitantly because he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"You didn't recognize your own son?"

The truth came with a rush, and with it came a blinding anger. He shouted, "You mean that punk, that—that kid with Britt, is our son?"

"Ward, I did the best I could," she told him, backing away a step. "It wasn't easy, living in hotels and always moving around."

"I let you take Ted because I thought a child needed his mother more than his father. You had me convinced that the life of a lawman left no room for a wife and child. But

how could I have done worse than you did?"

He rubbed his hand across his eyes, for a moment comparing the tiny baby he remembered with the whisky-drinking youth across the street in the saloon. It was an ugly picture and made him furiously angry. He went to his desk and sat down.

Marie came across the room. "You won't tell him?" she said.

"Tell him what?" he asked tonelessly.

"He thinks that Britt is his father." When Ward jerked his head up, she added quickly, "I had to tell him that; it was my only hope. Can't you see that?"

He said softly, "All right, Marie. Go back to the hotel now."

"What are you going to do?"

He shook his head.

She hesitated a moment more and then went to the door. But again she stopped. "Ward, I—"

"Go on out," he told her, his voice harsh now.

She went.

The regular shipment of currency and gold came in two days later. Ward was on hand when the stage stopped at the bank and the strongbox was handed down. He saw it carried inside, and then the stage was off, the shotgun rider waving a hand in a salute to Ward.

A few minutes later Carl Washburn came out. A small, nervous man, he was on the town council, and he also owned the bank. He said to Ward, "I don't like the looks of it, Marshal. Did you see those men watching the strongbox?"

Ward nodded, his eyes fastened on the three men who stood before the Prairie Saloon. Two of them he recognized as being Britt and his own son, Ted. The other man was a stranger, and Ward figured that he must have arrived the night before. They were lounging in the morning sunshine and looking toward the bank.

"They haven't done a thing yet, Carl," Ward told him.

Washburn's voice was high pitched naturally, but it rose until it was almost shrill as he said, "I've seen you run men out of town for less than what they've done. I don't like the way you're pussyfooting around them." He hesitated and then blurted out, "And who's that woman you were so glad to see?"

With mingled disgust and anger, Ward said, "She's the wife of that man in the middle there, and the mother of the boy." He strode off, leaving Washburn looking after him blankly.

He waited until mid-afternoon before he crossed the street to the Prairie Saloon. It was hot on the dusty thoroughfare, the air dense with dust from the passing of wagons. From the saloon came the hum of voices. Ward pushed inside.

Britt, Ted, and the stranger stood bellied up to the bar near the door. They turned when Ward entered, and watched him coldly. The third man, the newcomer, was a real hardcase. Ward thought that Britt had stepped out of his class. This stranger was a gunman.

"Here comes the law, men," Britt said mockingly. "Everybody start shaking in their boots."

The three men laughed coarsely. Ward focused his gaze on Ted, and tried with all his will to forget, for the moment, that this was his son.

"Get out of here," he said to the youth.

Ted made no move to go, but stood with a lop-sided grin on his face, confident that he would be backed up by Britt and the gunman.

"I told you to get out," Ward repeated.

Ted glanced at Britt, who said, "He hasn't done a thing, Marshal. You think this is your town, but things are going to be different now."

"Shut up."

The youth, brash now that he had been backed up, flushed in anger, and his hand dropped to the butt of his revolver. Ward repressed his almost instinctive reflexes, and stood waiting for the boy to make his play. When he did it was amateurish, as Ward had known it would be. Before the revolver had cleared leather, Ward had slammed the barrel of his own gun against the side of the youth's head. Ted slumped, and Ward caught him in his arms.

"He didn't do a damn thing," Britt screamed, his face livid. "You pushed him into drawing on you."

WARD said nothing, but began to drag the limp body toward the door. Britt followed, enraged. "He didn't do a thing, you hear? You came here to get him, and you forced him into it."

The batwings swung closed between them and Ward kept on dragging Ted across the street toward his office. Movement on the street stopped for a moment and all eyes turned toward him, waiting. But Britt didn't come through the door, and neither did the stranger.

Ward went into his office and put Ted into a cell, dropping him gently onto the bunk. For some time he stood looking down at the pale face, noting the vicious red welt that the barrel of his gun had raised.

"My son," he said to himself. Then he closed and locked the door of the cell.

He had expected Marie to come to the jail, but he didn't expect her to bring lawyer Green with her. They both came into the office less than an hour after he had brought in Ted. Green was a big, blustery man, one of the two lawyers in Plainview. Marie was furious. The moment she came through the door she began to rail at Ward

He listened to her angry words stoically, then turned to Green. "What do you want?"

"I want you to release Mrs. Harker's son," Green began in his best courtroom manner. "You have no right to hold him. He wasn't causing a disturbance, at least not until you put in an appearance. Even the owner of the saloon has no complaint." He drew an official-looking piece of paper from the pocket of his coat. "There are the papers. Now let him out."

Ted watched all this sullenly through the bars of his cell. Marie went to him and looked at the welt on the side of his head, then came back to Ward.

"Why'd you do it?" she asked. "Was this supposed to be some kind of punishment?"

"Get out," Ward said. "Both of you."

He grabbed the paper from Green and ripped it to shreds. The lawyer's countenance grew dark and he stormed, "You let that boy out or you'll hear from the county seat."

Ward advanced threateningly toward the lawyer, and he gave ground. "Go to the county seat if you want to, but get out of here." He pointed toward the door.

THE HOLE TRUTH

by S. Omar Barker

The badger's never satisfied with just a single home,
But keeps on digging brand-new holes wherever cattle roam.
Of course they come in handy for the badger tribe to hide in.
But they are hell-a-hootin' in a country cowboys ride in.
For when your pony steps in one there is no way at all
To keep both horse and buckaroo from taking quite a fall.
It may not bust the pony's leg nor get the rider killed.
But badger holes are hell for sure to get a cowboy spilled!

Green spluttered for a moment more, but he knew he was defeated. He went out. Marie stopped just inside the door. "What are you trying to do, Ward?" He closed the door in her face without a word.

He saw Cathy that evening, and she was not in a pleasant mood. She had heard of his jailing the youth. She asked, "Why did you pick on him, Ward? What was he doing that you had to hit him? You'll kill somebody that way someday."

He heard the pain in her voice and hesitated on the brink of telling her the truth. But he couldn't. He should have told her long ago about Marie, but now that Marie was here it was too late for that. Cathy was too upset now to understand about a marriage that had ended seventeen years ago. His past life was something they had steered clear of in conversation, for he had been afraid that it would only serve to point up the differences between them.

"I know what I'm doing, Cathy," he said. "Hitting that boy was one of the hardest things I ever had to do."

"But he wasn't doing anything, Ward," she said. "Why the boy and not one of the others?"

"I know what I'm doing," he repeated, his voice coming lounder.

He took her shoulders in his hands as if somehow that would convey what he felt inside. But she looked up at him and, in the dim light, he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

She said, "I'm trying to understand, Ward, but you won't help me."

She twisted out of his grasp and went into the rooming house behind them.

"Cathy, wait," he called, but she was already gone. He turned and walked slowly back toward the center of town, a strong sense of loss dogging him.

It was cold in the bank, and dark. Ward sat in a hard-backed chair just outside Carl Washburn's cubbyhole office. In front of him was a low rail fence, then an aisle, and then the teller's cages.

Perhaps this idea he had was a waste of time; may he had Britt pegged all wrong. But he couldn't take any chances. There was more than just a pile of inert gold coins at stake; the life of his son hung in the balance.

He thought of Ted back in his cell, still not quite able to reconcile the youth with the tiny baby he had remembered all through the years. And he thought of Cathy, too. Their age difference had proved too great a hurdle for them. If she were his age she could have understood how it was with him and Ted. If he were her age, the whole thing would not, could not, have happened.

But that didn't change the way he felt about her. For a short time after seeing Marie, he had thought he still loved her. But that was only a foolish attempt to go back in time. Cathy was the one he loved and now, he thought sadly, she was lost to him, too. Twice, then, he had loved and lost. At forty, there would be no third time for him.

He got up out of the chair and began to pace the floor, trying to rid himself of his thoughts, but the dark stillness provided no distraction and his mind kept coming back.

LATER, he heard the town wake up outside, and once he went to the window and hazarded a look up the street. He saw Gus Sloman cross from the cafe to his store and go inside. Ward's stomach gnawed with hunger as the morning went on, and he tightened his belt to quell the feeling.

He hoped this idea he had would prove out. By coming into the bank at night, his presence there would be unknown to Britt and the hardcase. He could possibly squelch the whole thing without gunfire.

At a quarter to nine Sam Abernathy, the head teller, rattled his keys in the lock of the front door and came inside. He had been told that Ward would be in the bank, and he was visibly nervous as he nodded toward the marshal.

"Just go on about your business as always," Ward told him. "If anybody knocks on the door, open the curtain and see who it is. If it's them, give me a signal and I'll come open the door. Understand?"

Abernathy nodded, then went to the vault. He twirled the knob, and presently pulled open the heavy door. Five minutes later there was a knock on the outside door. Abernathy looked at Ward, who nodded.

The two men walked toward the outside door. Abernathy pulled back the curtain and peered out, then said, with a sign of relief, "It's Washburn."

When the bank owner was inside and the door locked again, Ward said, "I thought I told you to stay away until it was over."

"It's my bank," Washburn told him, then added, "They're eating breakfast at the cafe just as calm as you please. I don't think they're going to try it."

"I hope not," Ward said. "But their time isn't up yet."

At nine Abernathy raised the shade on the door and unlocked it. Ward had placed Washburn in his office. Abernathy and the other teller who had just arrived had been told to keep down in case any shooting started. A minute after the door was unlocked it came open and Britt and the gunman walked inside.

As soon as they were in the building, Britt drew a pistol from beneath his coat and came across the room. He was white-faced and looked nervous. His partner in crime stayed near the door, but out of sight of the street. Ward crouched behind a desk on the opposite side of the room from the tellers' cages and watched.

Britt went to the first cage and said, "All right, let's have it." He shoved the revolver toward the teller.

As Ward had instructed, the man bent over as if reaching into a drawer for money. But he kept stooping down to the floor, and finally dropped out of sight. Before the startled Britt could make a move, Ward called across the room, "Drop the gun, Britt." He sent a shot crashing over Britt's head as a warning.

Britt jerked around, trying to place the voice, the revolver still in his hand. But his partner at the door didn't waste time. He caught sight of movement behind the desk and triggered off a shot. It sent splinters flying around Ward, and he turned his attention toward the front of the room. But Britt's partner was no amateur. He found cover at the end of the tellers' cages. Ward slammed a shot at him, the roar of the gun pounding through the room.

Ward broke into the open, running low along the fence toward the front of the bank. Britt fired hurriedly and missed, and then Ward was behind another desk. When the gunman fired again, Ward countered with a shot of his own. The gunman howled in pain. His leg went out from under him and he fell into the open, trying to get off another shot at Ward. The bullet clipped the edge of the desk and then dug a furrow across Ward's left shoulder.

The .45 Colt jumped in his hand, and the gunman jerked once and lay still. Britt blanched at the sight of his dead partner. In terror, he dropped his revolver and raced blindly for the door. Ward raised his own gun but did not fire. He watched Britt disappear outside, and then heard the sound of a horse running as Britt made his getaway.

As soon as the shooting stopped, Washburn came from his office, warily at first, until he saw that the danger was over. The two tellers came up from the floor. Then the bank filled with people who had heard the shooting.

"It's a dirty shame the other one got away," Washburn lamented. "Couldn't you have gotten him, too, Ward?"

Ward shook his head and muttered, "I never had a chance."

The wound in his shoulder was little more than a scratch, but Ward was glad of the attention it drew. Because of it, he didn't have to answer any more questions about the fight.

It was nearly an hour later before he got back to his office. He had stopped in at the doctor's office and had him dress the wound. He had answered questions until he was almost hoarse, and he looked forward to the sanctuary of the office. H still didn't know what to do about Ted. He had prevented the youth from getting mixed up in the robbery, which was what he had intended all along. But what to do now?"

MARIE was there when he arrived. He looked at her and at Ted, and saw the boy regarding him curiously. Marie said, "I told him, Ward. I told him everything."

"It's to late for us, Marie," he said. "You knew what they were planning."

She shook her head. "It's not too late for him, Ward." She looked toward her son and

then back at Ward. "I'm going now—after Britt. I told Green not to do anything about your keeping Ted here. It's all up to you now. You seem to have a way of taking care of things."

"But you're the boy's mother," Ward objected.

"Not much of a mother," she pointed out. "You said so yourself. I think Britt needs me now, Ward. This was the first time he's ever tried anything like robbing a bank. I hope it's his last."

"I hope so, too."

She started toward the door, then stopped again. "You could have killed Britt, couldn't you?" When he said nothing, she added, "Thank you, Ward—for everything."

He said, "His changing his name didn't make him any less my brother, Marie. Don't think I let him go because he was your husband."

"I know. Good-by."

Then she was gone, and Ward went to his desk. For some time he sat looking at the blank wall, conscious that Ted's eyes were on him. He should say something, he knew, but what to say? How do you start out with your son when he's an utter stranger to you?

"You could let him out now." The words startled him, and he looked toward the door. Cathy was there, answering the question he had just been asking himself.

He got to his feet. "Cathy, I have to tell you something."

"Don't bother. Marie has already told me. Why didn't you let me know you had been married before, Ward? Don't you think I would have understood?"

He shook his head. "I thought it would widen the gap between us. After all, we're eighteen years apart."

"Eighteen, twenty-eight—who cares?" She came close to him. "You love me, don't you?"

"You know I do. I want to marry you."

Her eyes began to sparkle again and she said quickly, "I accept. Now, old man, let your son out of his cell."

Ward unlocked the door. Cathy said to Ted, "I hope you'll stay with us, but you know that you don't have to. I won't even claim to try to be a mother to you; you already have one. But I will be your friend, if you'll let me."

The boy was obviously embarrassed by this attention, but he managed to stammer out, "All right, Miss-er—Mrs.—"

He let it drop, and then brightened. "You got me out of jail, and that was more than Mom could do."

They laughed and he said, "I'll go over to the hotel. I guess you two have a lot to talk about."

When he was gone, Cathy said, "No more secrets, Ward?"

"Not a one. You've found me out."

"Then kiss me."

He did.

GOLDRUSH TRANSPORTATION

WHEN the excited cries of "gold" echoed from the California diggings to the Rocky Mountains and eastward, men and women left their homes, jobs, and businesses and headed West.

The Brownsville, Nebraska, *Advertiser* wrote that in 1859 a man crossed the plains pulling a sled. Another passed through on foot, carrying a ham in a knapsack. Big Conestoga wagons vied with sulkies, spring wagons and buggies. Baby buggies and small dog-drawn wagons were also used. Even the lowly wheelbarrow made its debut. A printer pushed his type and newspaper equipment in this one-wheeled conveyance.

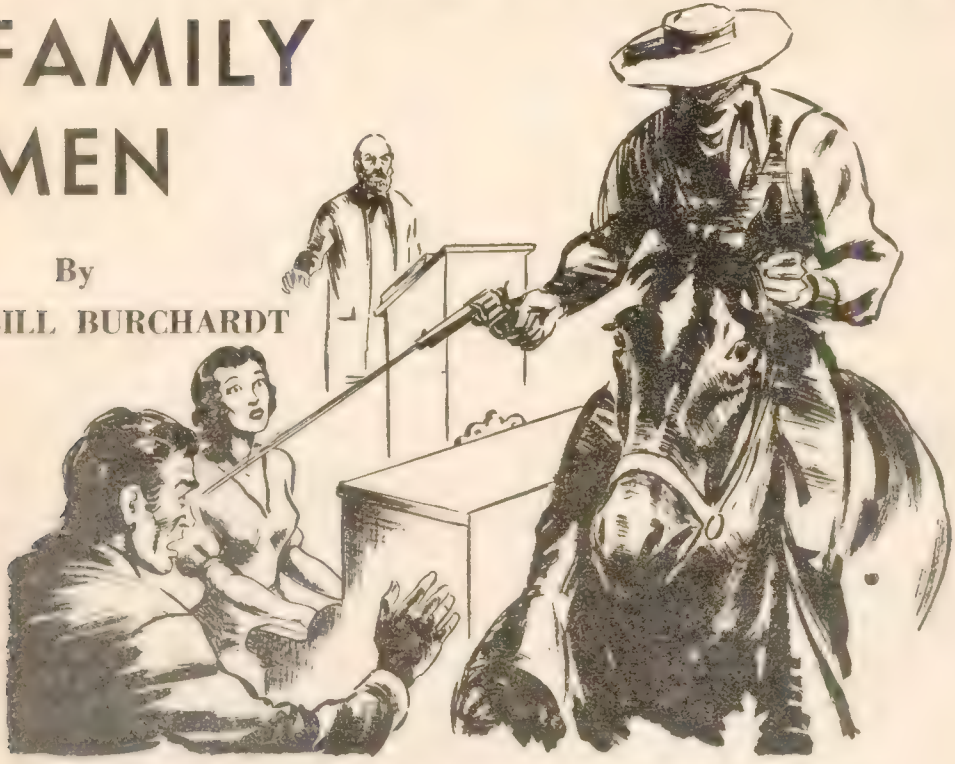
The prize for uniqueness goes to the windwagons. Several inventive geniuses built a combined windwagon and handcart, which is supposed to have made the trip from Missouri to the mountains in twenty days. The builders stuck a pole in the center of the cart and fastened canvas to it to make a sail.

Another windwagon built to carry about twenty-four passengers had four extra-large wheels—each as tall as a man. It was nine feet wide and was propelled by a gigantic canvas sail. Sad to relate, this three-thousand-pound contraption ended up in a gully, from which it couldn't move because there was no wind to fill its sail.

——*Fred Harvey*

The MARSHAL and the FAMILY MEN

By
BILL BURCHARDT



"Insult my mother, will you!" the rider yelled in frenzy.

OUTSIDE the church cicadas were singing, making the morning dry and hot with their clatter. Inside, Jennie's hands moved over the keys of the reed organ, and her voice lifted as she sang with the congregation.

Reverend Avery smiled at her from the pulpit, then shifted his glance to Emil, sitting beside her, as though asking, when are you two going to set the wedding date? As the song died away in the hot morning, Reverend Avery opened the Bible. The sound of a stumble and the thud of horseshoes arose on the porch outside.

The day turned ghastly then, dark with violence, and the next seconds were eternity for Jennie Hawkes. The horse came through the doors, its rider low over the saddlehorn. Inside, he straightened, adjusting the feedsack mask over his face. The horse and rider towered monstrously in the narrow church aisle.

The horse's eyes were rolling, terrified, and white, looming over Jennie now, and the rider's drawn .45 seemed as big as a single-tree as the man leaned across her to fire at Emil. Roar and flame seared her face, and burned powder stank.

A MAN CAN TAKE only as many chances—as his woman will let him!

The awful echos were dying as the rider yelled in frenzy, "Insult my mother, will you, you hay-shoveling son!"

Sidling, floundering, the horse turned, and the rider clutched the feedsack mask again as he spurred away from Jennie Hawkes and out of the church. Emil Grossman lay slumped across the pew beside her. The Cimarron Valley homesteaders were frozen in strained attitudes of unbelieving horror.

The minutes that followed were full of swelling sound to Jennie Hawkes. She knew her friends were helping her get out of the church. She felt foolish, and shocked. Then there was the striking heat of a noon sun, and wind-driven dust pelting her face as the covey of women led her down the street.

At last, from the hard comfort of a sofa in the Royal Hotel, she looked up at their white, excited faces, and told what she knew. "It was Manford Lutton."

Grandma Fid smoothed her hair. "Those Luttons! But, honey he was masked."

"I know," Jennie said. "But it was Manford Lutton."

The men on the crowd's edges shifted uncertainly, and Jenny heard her father say, "All right, men. Let's go."

They were back before dark. Jennie and her mother had driven the wagon home, and Jennie was in the yard feeding the chickens when her father rode in.

"He got away," Lew Hawkes said, and no more.

Jennie held her lifted apron filled with grain. "Got away? You know he rode straight to the Box L. How could he get away?"

Lew Hawkes said, "Daughter, would you have us ride into Box L after nightfall? He got away."

He led the broad-rumped plow horse off toward the brush shelter that served as a barn. Jennie emptied her apron, flinging the grain broadcast to the scurrying, clucking hens, and then went into the house. Dismay clutched her, but not the grief she would have felt if she had been in love with Emil Grossman.

She had not loved him, and Reverend Avery had been wrong in supposing that she should soon set the date. Emil had been too stolid for love. And now he was dead. Jennie plunged into the housework, bleak with the thought that one of the powerful Luttons could murder a man, before fifty witnesses at Sunday morning preaching, and get away with it.

Emil had homesteaded in Cimarron Valley only shortly after the Hawkes had wagonned in. He had trouble with the Luttons from the first, for his quarter-section adjoined the powerful Box L. On this Sunday morning, as he and Jennie rode to church together, Emil told Jennie how the Luttons had gathered and penned his small herd of heifer cows, claiming they had trespassed on Box L graze.

Emil had ridden to the Box L headquarters. With no word to anyone, he simply went to the corral, let down the bars, and drove his stock out. The Box L had seemed deserted. Neither Manford, old Casey Lutton, nor any of their hired guns, had appeared.

Then Myra Lutton, Casey's wife and Manford's mother, had come storming imperiously from the house. She had ordered Emil to herd his stock back into the Box L corral. Emil mounted his work mare and rode out, saying nothing, and driving his heifers before him.

Jennie Hawkes had been aghast at Emil's courage. Then she realized it was not so much courage as that broad-faced, round-shouldered Emil was too stolid and unimaginative to foresee the danger in what he had done. Jennie was imaginative; she warned him of possible ambush, that his cabin might be burned while he was away, that bullets might come crashing through his windows at night. But careless murder, before witnesses—even Jennie had not foreseen that.

JENNIE went about her work during the next days with a sense of shocked unreality and wariness, knowing that any attack might come now, that every day held danger, and every hour of darkness was risk for the families in Cimarron Valley.

Jennie felt that they must leave, and urged it on her father, though her blood pounded in her throat with sudden anger each time she thought of being driven out. The morning the gauntly lean stranger came, she sensed it was too late to run anyway.

From the kitchen window, Jennie saw him even before the dogs sensed his coming. He paused at the gate, carefully surveying the homesteader layout, then came riding in. Jennie stepped apprehensively into the yard, wearing the frayed old straw hat she used for hanging out clothes.

A stiff prairie wind shook the mane and tail of the rider's big red gelding. One of Lew Hawkes's blue hounds came from under the porch then, its hackles sharp, and Lew Hawkes came walking up from the feed lot. The stranger, sitting easily erect in the saddle, touched his hat to Jennie, and spoke to her father.

"Are you Lew Hawkes?"

Jennie's father nodded.

"Marshal Remy got your letter. I'm Deputy Marshal Jack Altus." The stranger took a leather case from his shirt and flipped it open. Bright morning sunlight caught the shield it held, glinting on its engraved legend. The unreality and shock that had haunted Jennie for days seemed to ease, and though her heart pounded in her throat, it was neither fear nor anger that drove it.

"Get down, Altus," Lew invited. "Have you had breakfast?"

"I've ridden the night," Jack Altus said.

"Jennie, make a fresh pot of coffee," Lew said, "and mix some more flapjacks. Get down, Marshal, and come in."

Jennie kept track of the talk as she cooked. Her father told of the valley trouble. "We've held our part alone," said Hawkes, "until this killing. We can't defend ourselves against cold-blooded murder, so I wrote the marshal's office. When will your posse arrive?"

Jack Altus lowered his cup, "Posse? I've no posse."

"You don't mean to ride into Lutton's place alone?" Hawkes demanded.

"Is there just one man to be arrested?"

Lew Hawkes's mouth opened. Then he looked away and spoke softly. "Yes."

Jack Altus arose. "Thank you for the coffee, Miss."

Jennie said, "But I have your breakfast ready."

Altus glanced at the honey-brown flapjacks, and took four of them in his hand. "I'll eat these on the way. Manhunting is better the earlier you get at it."

Jennie watched him ride out. As he closed the yard gate behind him, she turned on her father with fury in her eyes.

"Daddy, you were afraid to ride in to face the Luttons' hired guns. But you said nothing to keep that man from doing it!"

Lew Hawkes stared at the puncheon floor. "If the Luttons murder a United States marshal, maybe the government will send enough men to help us."

Jennie stopped her work at the stove in cold, unbelieving horror. Leaving dishes, pots, and pans unwashed, she hurriedly seized a basket of wet laundry and went to the clothes line.

As she hung sheets and pillow cases, she worked rapidly toward the barn. Then, using a wind-flapping sheet to shield her from sight of the house, she ran. In the barn, Jennie seized a bridle from a litter of tack swung from bailing wire hooks.

Clenching the jaws of a heavy-quartered old mare, Jennie forced the bit into place. The mare would let her ride, she knew, but it would be a painfully slow ride. Jennie led the mare behind the brush shelter and climbed on.

A dry, hot wind riffled the waist-high stocks of dry grass, and as Jennie jounced roughly along the wind whipped and snapped her apron like angry argument. A herd of antelope watched her from atop a small rise, the heat waves magnifying the little beasts until they looked as large as elk.

She did not catch sight of Jack Altus until she was approaching the Box L headquarters, a walled enclosure of elm-shaded lawn, the grass kept green by water trenched from springs in the nearby Oachitas. Jennie kicked her heels in the mare's flanks, driving her in a slow walk to a flat of land south of the Box L. From here she looked down on a strange and silent tableau.

Hot wind on the back of Jennie's neck, blowing her hair out before her, also blew away any sound that might have reached her. She saw Jack Altus standing alone, his horse ground tied inside the walled gates.

Altus was facing a young man, Manford Lutton, who lay in a shaded hammock. Lut-

ton, muscular and brown skinned, lay relaxed, shirtless and bare-footed, swinging gently. Jennie saw Altus step to the head of the hammock, gather the ropes and, levering with his knee, spill Manford Lutton on the green turf.

Lutton came to his knees, driving for Altus, who seized double fistfuls of Lutton's curly hair. Altus pivoted on his bootheals, letting the force of his spin have its way with Lutton as he swung. Distance shrank the pair to toy puppet size as Lutton back-pedaled against a white corral fence, splintered it, and fell, thrashing, into a wooden water tank.

FAINT shouts reached Jennie then, and her delight faded as she watched Box L toughs swarm from a bunkhouse. Jennie kicked the mare into motion, having no stomach to watch the beating she knew would come, and thinking she might shorten it by riding into the Box L herself.

As she rode through a thicket of mesquite and locust trees grown up along the irrigation trench, she saw the Box L gate swing open. A horse came wandering out, and Jennie Hawkes felt her head turn light at the brutality of what she saw.

They had thrust Altus's boot through his stirrup, and driven his horse out to drag him. No one could stand that punishment long. But when Altus's body was found, the Luttons would be in the clear; it would appear to be a rider's accident.

Jennie caught Altus's wall-eyed horse as it spooked through the mesquite thicket. Altus was already cut and bruised, and was unconscious. Minutes of work with her apron, soaked in the cold water of the Oachita hills, revived him so that he could sit his saddle. With the wounded deputy clinging to his saddlehorn, Jennie climbed on her mare. Holding the gelding's reins, she led him home.

"Lutton thought I was a tramp rider looking for work," Jack Altus said, propped up in bed the next morning. "When I told him he was under arrest, he said I'd have to ask Casey about that. I dumped him out of the hammock. That horse trough ought to have cooled him down, but he yelled for help. I don't remember much after that." He turned cool sage-green eyes on Jennie Hawkes.

Lew Hawkes packed tobacco in his pipe, fired it, and said thoughtfully, "The valley homesteaders have no stomach for riding into Box L, Altus. But if you're willing to go back after what happened to you, then I guess we ought to side you. I'll see if I can get together enough men to make up a posse. Do you want to try?"

"Why, yes."

"When?"

"As soon as we can get Miss Jennie out of here so I can get up and dress."

Jennie's eyes widened. "You couldn't stay in the saddle."

Jack Altus grinned. "Miss Hawkes, you'd be surprised at how good that big red horse is at staying under me, no matter what shape I'm in."

Lew sucked his pipe. "There's no hurry, Altus. Lutton won't leave. The homesteaders are going to take some persuading. I'll ride today, and try to get them to meet here tomorrow morning. There's no use rushing in."

Jennie understood. She sensed the same caution and fear as her father showed, in the small posse that gathered before daylight the next morning. Jennie helped her mother with breakfast. Then, through the shroud of tobacco smoke and hushed talk, she slipped out into the darkness, hurrying to the barn to change into jeans and a brush jumper.

When the posse mounted, mingling on their restless, circling horses, Jennie was among them, small, boyish, and unnoticed in the dark. As they rode away, Jennie heard her mother call questioningly into the night. It would be minutes before Mrs. Hawkes realized what had happened, and Jennie knew she would be beyond recall by then.

The morning star was yet two hours below the horizon when the posse rode up to the Box L. No light showed above the wall. Far off toward the Oachita bluffs a coyote's lonely yap and quaver came on the night wind.

The prairie grass, full of stored heat from yesterday's sun, sucked all the coolness from the wind, leaving it dull and tepidly warm against Jennie's cheeks. Jack Altus led, and it seemed to Jennie that, as the Box L came nearer, the posse lagged farther and farther behind the young deputy marshal.

One of the men, Jess Lundy, asked querulously, "You reckon old Casey's got a guard out?"

Blacksmith Houton answered, "If he had, we'd have heard Winchesters talking by now."

A long silence dragged out. Jess Lundy said, "I don't know. Maybe they're just waiting till we get under that wall. Then they'll slaughter us."

The posse dragged to a halt.

Jack Altus turned. "Casey Lutton may be high-handed, but he's no Mexican bandit. A killing like that would bring the whole country down on him."

"I'm hiding out—I'm wanted for cookie rustling."

Lundy said, "Emil Grossman's killing didn't bring much country down on Casey!"

"Are you afraid?" Altus asked pointedly.

Lundy shifted in his addle. He argued, "Like the good book says, 'A live dog is better'n a dead lion.' "

A horse blew, slobbering.

OLD Judson Fid explained hesitantly, These fellers are all family men, Marshal. If something happens to them, who takes care of their homesteads?"

"If something doesn't happen, you'll have no homesteads," argued Jack Altus.

Jess Lundy's crowbait horse backed across the field. He said, "By glory, I can move. There are other places. A dead man is no use to anybody. I'm going home."

As Lundy rode off, others followed. Blacksmith Houton sat for an indecisive moment, then grunted, "Gee-up! Haugh!" and bumped off after the retreating Lundy.

Judson Fid said, "Well, son, you tried."

Lew Hawkes said, "It's Marshal Remy's fault, for sending one man alone in here. Let him come himself, and bring enough men to give us some backing! Us family men!"

"Marshal Remy is a family man," Altus interrupted hotly. "So are most of his deputies!"

Judson Fid had ridden out of hearing. Lew Hawkes was reining around when he saw the small rider, now alone beside Jack Altus.

"Are you coming, neighbor?" Hawkes asked gruffly, somewhat doubtfully, and uncertain as to who this last lingering fellow was.

"Are you a coward, too, Daddy?" Jennie asked softly in the darkness.

"Jennie!" Lew Hawkes swung his horse and spurred close to Jennie's mare. "How the devil did you get here? You're riding home with me!"

A shot slapped through the windy night. The wind dulled the sound, echoing it faintly against the bulk of the Oachitas. Jack Altus's head rose, calculating the direction of the shot. Then he dropped his gelding into a hard run toward the road the scared-off posse had taken.

Gray was edging the eastern sky now. Following as fast as the mare could run, Jennie saw the posse, dark shadows circling a Box L windmill, yipping excitedly like Commanche bucks. The milling circle slowed and stopped as Altus, Lew Hawkes, and Jennie rode up. Jack Altus hauled his gelding to a squatting halt on the cropped short grass near the windmill.

Jennie's gaze fell then on a lone, bedraggled man, wet to the armpits, who sat hunched in the saddle of a fine Box L branded horse, near the sheet-iron stock tank.

"Look what we caught!" Jess Lundy said in high glee.

The hunched-over rider was Manford Lutton, sodden drunk, barely able to stay in the saddle.

"The young skunk was coming home from town," Lundy exulted. "We caught him soak-

ing his head in the stock tank, trying to sober up!"

"Who did that shooting?" demanded Altus.

Jess Lundy looked at the ground.

Judson Fid explained, "Jess thought the kid was going for his gun when he pulled his head out of the tank. Jess drew, but his gun went off before he got it out of the holster. Lucky Jess didn't blow his own leg off."

Lew Hawkes growled, "You ought to have held the young whipper-snapper's head under water until he drowned."

The pouting Lundy recovered and protested, "We'd have missed the fun of hanging him! Houton, throw a rope over that windmill platform."

Jack Altus reached to pick up the reins the drunken Manford Lutton had lost. He said quietly, "I claim this prisoner in the name of the law."

Lundy said, "We don't aim to see this murdering son bought off with Casey's money. He's swinging—now!"

Jack Altus led the horse past him.

Jennie Hawkes, watching this, saw Jess Lundy paw his gun butt. She cried, "Marshal!"

Jack Altus turned and saw Lundy's gun come level. The wild-eyed Lundy yelled in garbled wrath, then triggered. A bullet tore by Altus's ear. The gray dawn was blasted apart again as Lundy's second shot ripped earth between Altus's boots.

The marshal flipped his gun from the holster and fired before Lundy could get off a third wild shot. Lundy crouched, kneeling, losing his gun, as he grabbed his thigh.

"You've shot him!" shouted Lew Hawkes.

"He'll live," Altus said grimly.

"Let him bleed a little," commented Judson Fid disgustedly.

Lew Hawkes examined the wound and then stood up, his eyes blazing, "A lucky shot! It's only an accident that Jess Lundy isn't dead, and his fatherless children on your conscience, Marshal."

They heard the approaching sound of running horses that excitement and shooting had obscured. Casey Lutton and his Box L crew must have heard the shooting too, for they were coming in fast.

IT WAS too late to retreat, and the homesteader posse stood sullen and belligerent as Casey Lutton, a prune-faced banty of a man, led his riders in. Jennie saw Jack Altus grow taut with impending crisis as he walked to meet Lutton.

"Mr. Lutton," Altus said evenly, "I am a federal officer. I have arrested your son and he is in my custody."

Anger had turned Lew Hawkes desperate. He stood beside the fallen Lundy and thundered, "Marshal, you've forgotten! Jess said we'll hang that murderer. By glory, we've made every effort to avoid a clash. But now it's here and we'll die if we have to. This murderer hangs!"

It was brave talk, but Jennie doubted her father really meant any part of it. But his bellowing had given Casey Lutton time to think, and to move. Jennie felt an iron grip seize her arm, nearly dragging her off her horse. Casey Lutton's shrill old voice rasped nastily in her ear.

"This is a might pretty girl. Who does she belong too? She's your girl, isn't she, Hawkes?"

Lew Hawkes's bravado collapsed. He was crouched, almost cringing, his face blanched and white as he stared up at Casey and Jennie.

"Don't let us stop your party, you hay shovelers," Lutton snarled. "Go right ahead and hang my boy. My .45 is poking this gal's ribs. When Manford swings, I shoot!"

Jennie could feel the gun barrel hard against her side. No one spoke or moved. The sun was cresting the horizon now, sending long rays across the high range grass. Sun and wind were already hot, but Jennie felt cold and numb, as if death had begun to paralyze her body.

Casey drawled, "Looks like you're standing against a pat hand, Marshal. Are you going to draw or discard?"

When Jack Altus did not answer, Lutton's grin spread. "Tell you what," he offered, "we'll deal a new hand. You let my boy go, and I'll let this girl loose. But let's get it done; I have work to do."

Jack Altus released a long pent-up breath. "All right, Lutton. But the law will be back again; you know that."

The rancher growled, "I don't worry about trouble till it's staring at me."

Jack Altus nodded. He dropped the reins of Manford Lutton's horse and stepped aboard his own red gleding. He rolled a cigarette and lit it with a match taken from his hatband.

When the smoke was drawing well, Altus carefully flipped the burning match into the stirrup-high growth of dry prairie grass. The fire caught like kerosene. White smoke arose, sudden and stifling. The hot wind took blazing fingers of fire and swept them off across the grass. In an instant there were yards of crackling fire, reaching out, roaring now, gone beyond control.

Casey Lutton stood bolt upright in his stirrups. "You fool," he yelled, "look what you did! My winter range is afire!"

Lew Hawkes was running for his horse. "That wind is blowing the flames right toward the homesteads. If it's not stopped we'll be burned out!"

"The town'll go up!" shouted Blacksmith Houton.

"We can't stop it here," Casey's horse was turning, ready to start, as Lutton sought a course of action. "The irrigation trench'll stop it on the east. Hawkes, take every man you have. Hitch your plows and start running a fire break west from the trench. My boys'll backfire and fight the flames with wet sacks between you and your fire break. Maybe we can hold it long enough—I can't lose all this grass! All my cattle will die before February."

Horses were thundering off in every direction now. Jack Altus sat, calm and forgotten. As the prairie-fire-fighting parties rode out, with orders from Casey Lutton or Lew Hawkes, the crackle of burning grass and smoke ate rapidly north.

Whistling tunelessly, Altus retrieved the reins of Manford Lutton's horse. Young Lutton, sodden drunk, seemed to see nothing with his reddened, whisky-bleared eyes. Leading Lutton's horse, Altus rode off toward the Oachitas. Jennie Hawkes fell in quietly beside him.

Altus commented softly, "By the time they've worked together whipping that fire, maybe they'll have learned to work together in other ways."

Jennie glanced somewhat fearfully back at Manford Lutton. "What about him?" she asked.

"He'll get a fair trial for murder at the territorial capitol."

Jennie rode quietly for a moment. Then she looked up even more timidly. "What about me?"

"Why." Jack Altus said, "I reckon Marshal Remy won't object to one more of his deputies being a family man."

Coming in the next issue

A Roundup of Movie News and Views by

BOB CUMMINGS

●

Featuring a Review of United Artists'

RANCH FLICKER TALK

QUINCANNON, FRONTIER SCOUT

Starring

TONY MARTIN and PEGGIE CASTLE

plus

A word and picture personality sketch of

ERNEST BORGNINE

CHUCKWAGON COOK

a Fact Feature

By BURTON L. WOLLENZEIN

HE WAS, more often than not, cussed and cranky, presiding over a little kingdom of his own in which he was absolute monarch. The conditions under which he worked entitled him to be somewhat cantankerous. He was as much a part of early Western cattle ranching as were the cattle themselves.

The chuckwagon cook was the hero of any cowboy crew during the annual cattle roundups, and particularly so during a long trail drive. If he were a particularly good cook, according to the standards of the time, he was treated with the utmost respect by all hands, including the "boss" himself.

Usually he was a middle-aged ex-cowboy who had learned his trade in some small restaurant, a ranch house or on a river steamboat. In some instances, his lack of cooking skill made it seem doubtful that he had ever had any training at all in the culinary arts. At best he was never a chef in the strict sense of the word, but if he were any good at all he could throw together a hunger-satisfying meal for several dozen men in just a short time, under almost any conditions.

Before any more is said about the cook and his problems, a description of the chuckwagon seems necessary. Any discussion which covers one without including the other is like serving beef stew minus the beef.

The method of transporting food supplies

for hungry trail crews went through a period of evolution, ranging from the early pack mule to a cart drawn by a double yoke of oxen. While the ox-drawn carts could keep pace with the slowly moving herd, there were times when more speed was needed; for instance, in order to set up camp before the herd arrived with its tired, dusty, and hungry trail riders. This need for speed brought about the mule-drawn chuckwagon.

The chuckwagon was a regular farm wagon with the end gate removed and the chuckbox bolted onto the rear of the wagon box. While the size of the chuckbox varied, depending on the ideas of the man who built it, generally it was about four feet high and two feet wide at the bottom, with sides sloping upward so that the box had a width of about six inches at the top. In some instances it was made in a rectangular shape, with the top and bottom being the same in width. The box was cleverly fitted with drawers and shelves, each of which had a definite purpose.

On long trail drives, the chuckwagon often carried a six-month food supply. Shorter drives usually required only a three-month supply. Later, as towns sprang up along the trails, food supplies were replenished en route. The bulk of the food was carried in the wagon box. It usually consisted of such items as sugar, bacon, beans, dried fruit, canned goods, and other staple items.

The bottom compartment of the chuckbox held the sourdough crock or keg, which was the pride and joy of every cook. If the cook quit his job and went to work for another ranch, his sourdough keg went with him. Often he slept with it under his blankets, to keep the sourdough warm.

The middle compartment of the chuckbox usually contained cans of beans, sugar, rice, and roasted coffee beans. The smaller upper section contained such items as salt, pepper, baking powder, soda, and whatever medicinal items were carried.

Cooking utensils were stored in a hinged box which was bolted to the bottom of the wagon bed directly below the chuckbox. Grain for the team was stored in a box under the driver's seat. Lashed to one side of the wagon was a ten or twenty gallon water keg. To the other side a tool box was bolted. One of the most important items was the coffee grinder, which was fastened to the chuckbox. Coffee was ground fresh for each meal.

A better camp kitchen was never devised. To the cowboy it was more than just the place where his meals were prepared; it was home, where there was always food, hot coffee, a fire, and companionship. He never refered to it as a chuckwagon, but as "The Wagon."

Just prior to the time the wagon was needed for a roundup or trail drive, the cook would have it hauled out of the shed, and would give it a thorough inspection for any repairs that might be needed. He would also scrub every nook and cranny of the wagon, using a strong caustic solution.

After everything was in order, the wagon would be stocked with provisions and supplies. The type and quality of food with which the wagon was stocked depended greatly on the cook's and ranch owner's reaching some sort of agreement. Some ranch owners spared little expense in feeding the hands, whereas others tried to get by with as little expense as possible.

Out on the trail, the cowboys would still be wrapped in their blankets at four in the morning. While they were still dreaming whatever cowboys dream at that time of the morning, the cook would be working busily to get an enormous breakfast ready for his hungry crew. A good cook could make an outfit, a bad one could ruin it.

As soon as the breakfast was ready, the cook's leather-lunged bellow would inform the sleepy cowboys that the meal was ready and they had better come and get it pronto—or else.

TAKING their eating tools from the chuckbox table, the cowboys would help themselves from skillets, dutch ovens, molasses pitcher and coffee pot. They would sit cross-legged around the fire, eating their breakfast as such a meal should be eaten—with ravenous appetites and little, if any, conversation.

By the time breakfast was finished, the night wrangler would have brought up the saddle herd and driven them into a makeshift

corral. The cowboys would roll cigarettes, drop their dishes into the wreck or roundup pan under the cook's work table, then proceed to roll and tie their beds.

While each cowboy was roping and saddling his horse, the cook would be washing dishes and stowing things away. Since the horses would feel rather frisky at this time of the morning, there would always be the chance that some unlucky cowboy's bucking horse would tear through the cook's area, knocking over pots and pans and kicking dust into the grub. Such an unlucky cowhand would usually find himself, thereafter, hauling in more than his share of firewood or cowchips for the cooking fire. He might even have to appease the cook's anger by offering to dry the dishes.

Then the night guards would ride in and eat, and by daybreak the herd would be on the move. The cook's equipment would have been carefully replaced, the wagon loaded. The last thing to go on the wagon was usually the cowboys' bed rolls, which were securely roped to the wagonbox. As soon as the four mules were hitched to the wagon it was ready to move.

Some of the old-time chuckwagon cooks considered such tasks as loading bedrolls and hitching up the teams as being too menial for them, and beneath the dignity of their profession. In such cases, the jobs were performed by the horse wrangler or the cowboys themselves. One particular biscuit maker became so lordly that, not only did he demand that the mules be caught and hitched, but the lines must be handed to him after he was up on the wagon seat.

The wagon boss usually went ahead of the others, to look for a camping spot with wood and water, as well as to look over the general lay of the land. Shortly after he found a suitable place, the chuckwagon would arrive and the cook would hurry to prepare the meal before the herd arrived. The noon meal was likely to be pretty much the same as the breakfast: fried beef and gravy, sourdough biscuits, molasses, and coffee.

By the time the herd arrived, the meal would be ready and waiting. The noon stop was brief. After the meal was over and fresh mounts had been saddled, the herd would again be on the move.

With the night campsite selected, the cook might set a kettle of beans boiling, and make whatever other preparations were needed, after which he had several hours for himself before the herd arrived. During such periods he might relax and do a bit of reminiscing.

He might recall the times he struggled to get the wagon across a swollen creek, or through beds of quicksand. There were the times he was forced to attempt his culinary art during a howling blizzard or a drenching rain. Or he might remember trying to build a fire with wet wood under a tarpaulin shelter, and nearly choking from the smoke.

He might tell tales of high winds blowing smoke in his eyes and dust in the food; of trying to perform miracles with inadequate supplies of food furnished by employers too stingy to see that their men were well fed. All these things and many others were food for the thoughts of the chuckwagon cook, when he was fortunate enough to get a rest period.

On the other side of the ledger were the feelings of pride stirred in him by the occasional words of praise from the cowhands for a particularly appetizing dish he had whipped up. He might think of the time when several cow outfits joined operations, and he and the other cooks vied with each other in trying to produce the most tasty dishes. There were such things as rice-and-raisin pudding, peach pie baked in a Dutch oven, or dried apples or apricots rolled in sourdough, then sewed in a sack and hung in a kettle to steam.

MAKING of that all-important item, "sourdough," may have varied somewhat from one cook to the next, but generally it was prepared in the following manner. Into a crock or wooden keg of about five-gallon capacity, the cook put three or four quarts of flour, then added salt and just enough water to make a medium-thick batter. The container was then placed in the sun for several days to ferment. This fermentation process was often helped along by the addition of a little molasses or vinegar.

The first batch of batter was solely for the purpose of seasoning the keg. After the fermentation was well under way, the batter was poured out and the keg filled with a new batch. Each day it was put in the sun, and each night it was wrapped in blankets. As mentioned previously, many cooks even slept with their kegs.

After several days of this treatment, the sourdough was ready to use. From then on until the end of the season, the keg was never cleaned out. Each time the cook removed some of the dough for a meal, he put back enough flour, salt and water to replace it. When making bread or biscuits, he simply added enough flour and water to the sourdough batter to make a medium-stiff dough.

Another old stand-by of the chuckwagon cook was son-of-a-gun stew. This was not the usual name for this dish, but it was the name used when women were within earshot. It was made of the liver, heart, sweet breads, marrow guts and brains of fresh-killed beef. Sometimes it might not be made of beef belonging to the particular ranch owner running the trail drive. But then, one man's beef tasted as good as another's.

Everything used in the stew, with the exception of the brains, was cut into fine pieces and put in the pot to stew. When the meat was done, the brains were stewed in a separate pan and thickened with flour, then added to the stew and seasoned with salt and pepper. The cowboys used to say that a son-of-a-gun stew contained everything the animal had with the exception of horns, hoofs, hide and holler.

Most of the chuckwagons now in existence can be found in rodeos, museums and at dude ranches. In certain isolated parts of the Western range country a few of these wagons are still in use, but for the most part they have had their day and, like the buffalo and the open range, are now just a part of Western history.

Along with "The Wagon" has gone the old-time cook who used this rolling kitchen. There were times when he helped to break up a stampede, and other times when he took up his rifle and helped defend the herd against Indians or rustlers, but generally his job was much more prosaic. Yet, along with the cowboy, the peace officer, and the Indian fighter, the chuckwagon cook did his part in the building of the West, and should get the credit that is his due.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 71)

1. Ft. Bridger and Kit Carson were named for scouts, Loving and Goodnight for trail drivers.

2. Sequoia National Park.

3. Skunk, especially one sub-species which they called "the hydrophobia skunk." Many naturalists believe they were in error in this belief.

4. Snubbing a horse or other animal means tying its head up short to a post, tree, saddlehorn or other anchor.

5. Apache.

6. Creede.

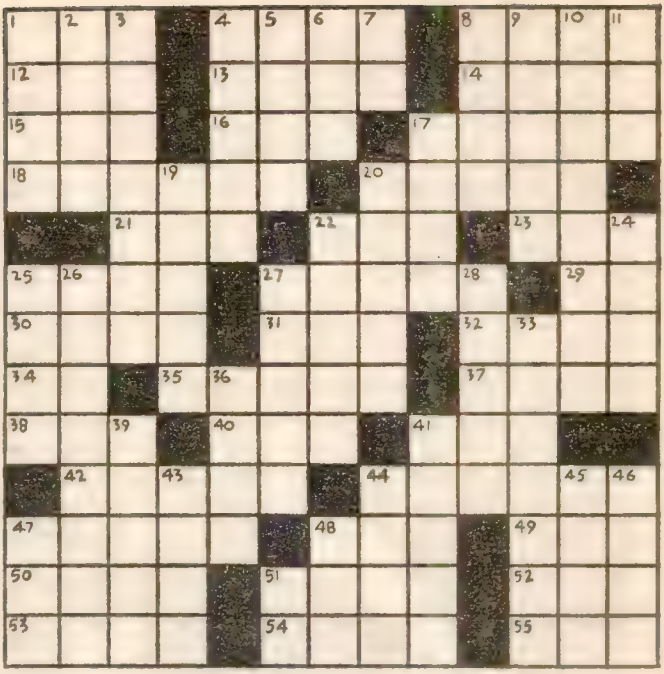
7. Soaking a horse is letting him stand around for awhile after saddling so that he gets used to the feel of the saddle and is less likely to pitch when mounted.

8. Oak.

9. Nevada.

10. Texas.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



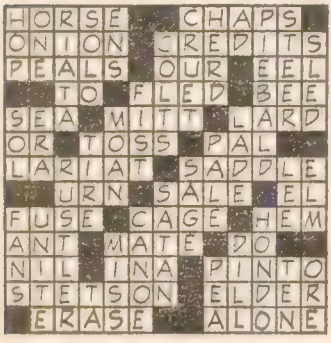
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 College cheer
4 Cabbage salad
8 Shade trees
12 Have being
13 Greater amount
14 Calf meat
15 By means of
16 Likely
17 Of great weight
18 Cowboy's seat
20 Roy Rogers' Trigger
21 Snakelike fish
22 Young dog
23 Period in history
25 Makes errors
27 Is concerned
29 Exists
30 Barrel
31 What we breathe
32 Country fellow (slang)
34 Hello!
35 Full of sunshine
37 Writing fluids
38 Ancient
40 In no way
41 To marry
42 Western ——— knife
44 Lasso
47 Battle
48 Possessed
49 Burned cigar remains
50 Lake bordering Ohio
51 Group of cattle
52 Born
53 Biblical garden
54 Amos 'n' ———
55 To speak

DOWN

1 Knocks
2 Region
3 Herdsmen
4 Little
5 To gallop easily
6 Paintings
7 You and I
8 Always
9 To rent
10 Unbranded calf
11 Foxy
17 Bob ———, comedian
19 Writing tables
20 To move with haste
22 Calico horse
24 Inquires
25 Sound repetition
26 Rodeo spectator on the fence
27 Indian's boat
28 More bashful
33 The original Westerners
36 Standard amount
39 Motherless calf
41 Cowboy
43 At what time
44 Cooking fat
45 On the sea
46 Those people
47 Lawyer's charge
48 Chicken
51 Laughter sound



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

The swirling, pouncing wall of water was an awesome sight

JUSTICE from FOUR PONDS

By JAMES CLYDE HARPER

IT WAS perhaps two hours past noon of a scorching summer day when Martin Lee saw the group of riders leave the tidy farm settlement out in the valley more than a mile away, and start up the long gradual slope toward his campsite. For almost a week Martin had been expecting this visit, and dreading it, too.

THE WILD FOREST creatures planned wisely, Martin knew . . . but some human beings schemed only to satisfy their own greed

He rubbed a lean hand across his angular jaw, and wondered if he should put away his holstered gun. But because it was as much a part of his game warden's regalia as his uniform and badge, he decided to keep it on. The group knew he used the weapon only to dispatch dangerous reptiles and hopelessly sick or injured wildlife. Too, if he took off the gun now, Gordon Boyd might think he had weakened in the stand he had taken a week ago.

The group reached the upland timber's edge and followed along the steep, erosion-cut banks of Wild Run Creek. Martin saw there were six of them, five on mules, one on a horse. The latter would be boisterous, barrel-chested Gordon Boyd. He was the only one of the farmers able to afford a riding horse.

Of the five on mules, Martin knew one would be Diana Dent, whose big brown eyes had mirrored hurt a week ago at his terse refusal of their request. She was returning with the men to ask again for the help they all so desperately needed. But Martin's answer must still be no. And because it must, Martin Lee turned his back on the approaching group to marshal his determination against the appeal of Diana's soft brown eyes.

Martin's gaze slipped along the steep-banked creek to the ponds the industrious beavers had created by damming the stream at four irregular intervals. The area was designated as Four Ponds on commission maps. Because of the drought it was the only remaining watering place for wildlife in a fifty-square-mile radius. Last week, sensing a prolonged drought, the beavers had tightly sealed most of the crevices in the dams, reducing downstream creek flow to a meager trickle.

Martin watched a flock of teal wing to one of the upper ponds, saw a buck deer bring his doe and two fawns to drink at the lower pond. From the vicinity of his tent near the lower pond dam, Martin heard a scolding bluejay and a barking squirrel, and somewhere a mocking bird trilled. Martin's hobbled horse strolled to the pond for a drink, almost straight across from the family of deer.

The buck suddenly looked in Martin's direction, big mule-like ears thrust suspiciously forward. Then quickly the deer family left the pond and vanished among the trees. Martin knew that his visitors from the valley were near.

By the sound of hoofs on shale, he knew the group was rounding a bend of the raggedly winding creek. He could then hear the rattle of harness bridles, the creak of aged farm saddles. Martin turned slowly.

"Good afternoon," he greeted them quietly.

Diana's father alone responded; the other men nodded curtly. Martin could feel Diana's eyes searching his face, but refused to meet her gaze. They arranged themselves in a tight semi-circle, Mr. Dent and Diana in the center, two of the men on either side.

Mr. Dent apparently had been elected spokesman, as he had been on the other visit. He was thin from overwork in the grueling summer sun, slightly grayed, and tense with the worry that clouded his puckered face. He glanced around at his companions as if for reassurance, then doggedly squared his work-bent shoulders.

"Warden, we have to have water. The creek flow has dropped to where it isn't enough to take care of our livestock, and our crops are about to burn."

Martin Lee knew how desperate their plight was. They had come into the mountain meadow valley three years ago. None of them was experienced at irrigation farming, but none of them could afford windmill water pumps. Under the guidance of Gordon Boyd, who had lived in the West before, they had undertaken to level and contour the land, depending on the creek flow for crop irrigation.

There had been gradual progress the first two years, mainly because spring and summer rains and winter snows had produced a steady flow in winding Wild Run Creek. The second year they had actually realized a slight profit on their crops. But they had ignored Martin's advice to use the profit for windmill pumps as a precaution against drought, and had listened to Gordon Boyd instead.

The only one of the group able to buy a new implement instead of mending when something broke, Boyd had scoffed at the possibility of a drought in this mountain meadow, and had persuaded the farmers to expand their tillage so they could reap more annual profits.

Each farmer had leveled approximately forty additional acres, bringing the total valley land farmed to about five hundred acres. Providing water for that large an area might not have been too much for Wild Run Creek under normal conditions. But this year spring

rains had been frugal, and it still lacked more than a month until time for the summer rains. By then all the farmers would be burned to a crisp, unless water from Four Ponds was released. But if that were done, the wildlife of the sprawling refuge would greatly suffer, especially if the summer rains were scant.

Martin Lee slowly shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dent, but my answer is still no."

He looked at Diana an instant, then glanced at the other men. Three of them seemed as deeply troubled as Mr. Dent was. Although a sullen scowl darkened Boyd's face, he did not seem as pinched with concern as the other men.

"The beaver are smart," Martin said. "The creek flow has dropped because they've sealed the crevices in the dam. Animal instinct warned them that the drought may be prolonged. You can bring your livestock here for water, and haul away what you need for your homes. I'm sorry, but that's the best I can do."

"It's not the best you can do," said Gordon Boyd in an ugly tone. "You could dynamite the lower dam and give us that pond of water. It would carry our crops until the summer rains."

"Dynamiting the lower dam would cause a wall of water to surge down on your farms, wiping out everything in its path," declared Martin. "Your crops would be uprooted, your land washed away, some of your buildings perhaps flattened. And dynamiting would destroy many of the beaver and fish."

"Do you mean to say," Diana interrupted, "that you value the welfare of beaver and fish more than that of families with children?"

"Let's put it this way, Miss Dent," said Martin quietly. "The wildlife commission values the welfare of the game refuge, which was established twelve years ago, more than it does the welfare of the valley."

MARTIN watched her stiffen, her large brown eyes darkening with anger. It was disconcerting to have her angry with him, since Martin had recently become aware that his occasional visits down to the farms were more in the hope of saying hello to Diana than of talking to the men about windmills and crops.

Martin saw hope die in the faces of the men, all except Gordon Boyd. He wished he could penetrate the burly man's thoughts. Boyd wasn't as upset as the others over Martin's refusal to give them water. His eyes held a crafty gleam, as if he enjoyed a secret exultation.

Boyd caught Martin's gaze on him and blinked. Then anger surged into his face and his mouth became a tight slit. He picked up the reins to turn his horse, then gave his attention to Mr. Dent and the others.

"He isn't going to help us, so we might as well go."

They turned and rode away. Diana not even glancing back. Martin wished he could have made them understand. He didn't want them to lose their crops, and certainly not their lands. They had hinted, on their visit last week, that they might lose both because they couldn't repay money they'd borrowed to conduct this year's expanded planting.

Diana should have understood that his first loyalty as field warden for the Federal Wildlife Commission must be to the refuge, particularly to the now critically important Four Ponds watering area. That was why he had established his camp here a month ago—to safeguard the ponds and be on hand if the well-built beaver dams needed emergency aid from human hands.

Martin strolled to his camp, built a small fire, and put on a pot of coffee to boil. He wondered if now, in desperation, the farmers would resort to force. Gordon Boyd probably would not be above violence to gain a desired objective. He certainly had some scheme in mind, to judge from his momentarily off-guard expression.

Boyd's ready mention of dynamiting the lower dam indicated he had previously considered the idea. Martin did not believe the others would condone such violent methods, even though their need for water was desperate. But he would not put it above Gordon Boyd. He resolved to maintain a careful watch on the lower dam, particularly after dark.

He decided to change his routine to sleep-

ing by day and keeping guard at night. He could depend on alert wildlife to sound a warning during the day and arouse him if an interloper appeared. He would put the new plan into effect immediately, by taking an afternoon nap so he could stand guard tonight.

But hardly had Martin stretched out on his cot before a commotion began at the upper pond, about three hundred yards away., Bluejays shrieked, squirrels scolded, woodchucks chattered, and a flight of teal winged wildly away.

Martin quickly sat up and pulled on his boots. He arose from the cot, got his hat, and buckled on the service revolver. He decided to ride, since the sure-footed horse could move him fast if speed were necessary.

Quickly he saddled, swung astride the horse, and started for the upper pond. Suddenly the timber around him became a noisy bedlam of scurrying animals and birds. Then, as Martin caught a taint on the air, every nerve in his body shrieked the warning that all woodsmen dread. Fire!

Martin urged the horse ahead recklessly, unmindful of limbs that slapped at his face and tree trunks that bruised his legs. He saw the thin column of smoke and judged that the fire was on the other side, near the head of the upper pond.

A sound not unlike two boards being banged together suddenly came from the pond, near the fire. Immediately the surface of each pond was dotted with blunt-pointed dark brown heads, as beaver responded to the warning one of their number had sounded. But fire was an enemy they could not fight, a relentless enemy that no wildlife could successfully oppose. The beaver swam in erratic circles, disturbed by this threat of forest disaster but unable to combat it.

Martin glimpsed scores of shapes hurrying through the timber—families of fleet-footed deer, quarrelsome porcupines, waddling fat badgers, bounding rabbits, and once, he thought, a lumbering brown bear, in close proximity to the fire. Martin knew there were bears in the game refuge, but so far they had managed to remain hidden, probably coming for their water at night.

Martin rushed his mount around the head of the pond, slowing to ford the waist-deep creek of backwater from the pond. On the other bank he hurried on toward the growing column of smoke. He was getting near enough to hear the crackling flames. He prayed the fire wasn't in live timber, where it could quickly get out of control by crawling up drought-parched trunks to resinous-rich crowns. In a matter of moments a crown fire could sweep the entire refuge, destroying every living thing.

Martin plunged into a heavy thicket, aiming straight for the climbing smoke column. He emerged from the thicket and found himself right at the fire. He jerked his horse to an abrupt halt and stared in surprise. The fire was in a heap of tinder-dry leaves over which had been placed some heavy dead limbs. This was no accidental fire of the kind forest conditions sometimes fiendishly contrived. The fire had been deliberately planned, the leaves and limbs had been gathered by human hands.

Martin jumped from his horse and pulled the fire apart. He snuffed out smaller limbs by thrusting them into the dry earth, and ran to the pond with the larger pieces. He let the leaves already afire burn out, but pulled those as yet uncaught away. He stayed with the fire until it was a pile of dead ashes, making sure there were no smouldering embers to burst out anew in a sudden gust of wind.

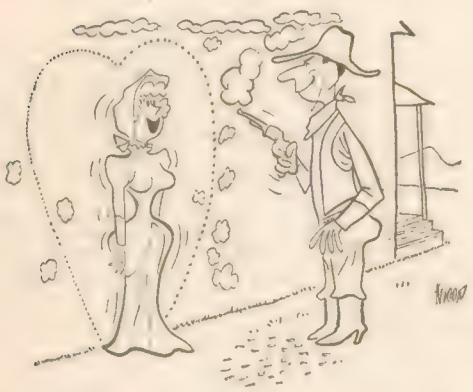
Satisfied at last there was no more danger, he mounted and started back the way he had come. He recalled the lumbering shape he had thought was a bear, and knew now that it had been the crouched figure of a man. He rather strongly suspected the man's identity, but was completely baffled as to his reason for deliberately starting the fire.

But as he retraced his path across the creek, Martin Lee suddenly understood. Downstream, at the foot of the largest pond, a thunderous explosion ripped the air, sending a wave of sound bouncing among the trees like a bevy of booming cannon.

Martin saw the blasted lower dam tower into the sky—water, earth, tree limbs and stone. Then, horrified, he heard the whine that became a grumbling roar as the pent-up waters of the pond charged savagely through the broken dam.

FASTER than he had hurried to check on the fire, Martin raced for the dam. He knew now why the fire had been built—to decoy him away so the dam could be dynamited. When he reached the edge of the dam, Martin knew there was nothing either he or the beaver could do. Many of the animals were swept to their deaths by the rolling, battering water as it surged madly through the broken barrier.

Below the dam, where so short a time ago there had been but a mere trickle, Wild Run Creek was now a writhing monster. Banks



"Why, Deadeye, I didn't know you cared."

were being eaten away, trees uprooted, shrubs ripped apart by the savage onslaught of the water. Boulders larger than buckets became bouncing balls from the water's mad rush to escape downstream.

Remembrance made Martin Lee blanch. He had warned that this might happen if the dam were dynamited. The five neat farms would be ripped apart when this devastating turbulence reached there.

Martin leaped into the saddle and flung his horse at headlong speed across the foothills in the most direct route to the farms. Anger grew with every leap the racing horse made—anger against the man who had destroyed one of the vital wildlife ponds, anger that water, instead of being used sparingly to offset drought, would be callously wasted doing harm to the farms.

It looks, Martin thought grimly, as if Gordon Boyd is deliberately trying to destroy the farms and crops. But maybe there's still a chance.

Martin drew his revolver as he neared the Dent home, and fired two shots into the air. He knew the other families would hear and would come to investigate. There wasn't a moment to lose if they were to offset even partially the destructiveness of the man-made flash flood which was surging down the winding creek.

For, as he was racing across the foothills with his warning, an idea had leaped into Martin's agile mind, based on observation of energetic beaver when they decided to build a dam across a swift-moving stream. Above the site selected for the dam, Martin had watched them place all kinds of obstructions to slow the speed of the water so it would not wash away their construction efforts.

Similar methods might work between the steep banks of Wild Run Creek, above where it descended onto the leveled farms. If the raging torrent could be slowed, much of the water might be diverted into the multitude of irrigation ditches, giving the thirsty crops added life, and lessening the destructiveness of the current as it coursed along the shallow creek where the banks had been leveled and planted.

Diana was the first to appear. From Martin's manner she immediately knew that something was gravely wrong. "What is it, Martin?" she asked quickly.

"Gordon Boyd has dynamited the lower dam," Martin said tersely. Then he raised his voice, as the others hurried up, so that they all could understand. "A wall of water is racing down the creek. We can't stop it, that I know. But I think we can slow it enough to save your buildings and most of your crops."

Martin quickly explained the procedure of beaver when building a dam across a swift stream. Everyone listened attentively. These people knew they were not familiar with many things of the West. They had been unversed in irrigation farming, had ignored Martin's warning against drought, and had since sore-

ly regretted it. They had never witnessed a flash flood, but knew from Martin's intense manner that he was not exaggerating the danger.

When Martin finished, Mr. Dent expressed the opinion of all. "Will you tell us what to do, Martin?"

Martin scanned the terrain along the creek and selected a spot about a thousand yards upstream from the farms and buildings. It was between two bends in the winding creek, turning in opposite directions, which would have a tendency to slow the rushing water. On either bank of the creek were thickets of tough mountain meadow shrubs, ideal for the plan that Martin had in mind.

He instructed the men to get axes and saws, and dispatched the older children to open every irrigation ditch, so all the fields would be reached by the water if his plan succeeded. In answer to a query from the women, he advised that they could help by carrying brush to the creek, and any other bulky object which would offer resistance to the racing wall of water.

"Remember," was his final terse caution, "that water's coming like a runaway express train, and isn't going to wait for anything. So make every move and every moment count. It's our only chance!"

They hurried to their appointed tasks, and worked with feverish haste. With flashing axes and singing saws the men reaped a huge harvest of thicket growth, which women and children rushed to the creek for Martin to add to the growing barrier. They had asked Martin to handle that phase, as he was the one who would best know how. Some brought rocks, which Martin tossed onto the piles of brush to give weight resistance against the oncoming, surging water. The older children rejoined the workers and reported that all irrigation ditches were opened wide.

Martin paused a moment to inspect the barrier's placement. Imitating the beaver's methods of slowing a swift stream, he had arranged one main barrier of T-shaped design which was thickest, broadest and highest, and weighted with the most stones. Upstream from this largest barrier, he had tossed piles of brush and stones at checkerboard intervals. These would tend to divert the stream in a crisscross pattern, and cause the current to fight itself. Then, he hoped, the T-shaped barrier would divide the current, and send it swirling against each bank, where friction would rob it of some power and guide it toward the downstream maze of irrigation ditches.

As Martin stood surveying the barriers, he heard the dreaded sound. It increased even as he listened. He turned and yelled to the frenzied workers. "Bring all you have cut! You haven't time to cut any more."

THEY hurried as Martin directed, tossing their bundles where he pointed. Then Martin had them all move back, the mothers holding onto their children. For he wasn't sure just what the rushing water would do when it hit their hastily improvised barriers.

They heard it coming like a strong wind tearing through tall pines. Then the crescendo lifted, like a train speeding across an endless mountain trestle. Louder and nearer and heavier it came. The roar seemed to press against their very eyeballs, to penetrate every inch of their bodies. The sky, the air, the very ground was filled with the ominous, nerve-chilling roar.

Then around the bend, fifty yards away, raced the man-made havoc. The five-foot wall of sand-colored disaster charged fiendishly against the curved bank of the creek. Pressure from behind made the wave climb the bank with a greedy leap. Some water splashed onto the top, but the bank wall held, turned the water, and sent it hurtling downstream toward the barriers of brush and stone.

It was an awesome sight, this swirling, pouncing wall of water and sand and bounding stones, creek debris and uprooted foliage, and dead bodies of beaver and other rodents the torrent had trapped coming down the creek. It rushed upon the first barrier, lifted it, then greedily absorbed it. But for the barest moment a portion of the water wall was slowed. Then it plunged on for the next barrier.

"Look!" Diana was shouting, to be heard above the thunderous roar.

She grabbed Martin's arm and pointed. Across the creek they saw the crouched figure

(Continued on page 100)

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100P

of a man darting toward the T-shaped barrier that was so necessary if Martin's plan were to succeed. Martin thought the man's crouched stealth resembled that of the figure he had glimpsed hurrying from the vicinity of the fire. Realizing he had been seen, the man straightened, but rushed on to the edge of the opposite creek bank.

"It's Gordon!" one of the men cried. "But what's he got? What's he going to do?"

"He has short-fused dynamite, which he's trying to light!" exclaimed Diana's father, pressing against Martin to be heard. "He's going to blow out the biggest barrier, so the water will destroy our farms and fields!"

Martin was grimly aware of the man's fiendish intent, and knew it must be prevented. As Boyd paused on the edge of the sandy bank to light the dynamite fuse, Martin drew his gun and yelled, "Drop it or I'll shoot!"

If he heard above the roar of the rushing wall of water, Boyd paid no heed. Martin carefully aimed at his arm and fired. The shot seared Boyd's flesh, and caused him to jerk, snuff out the match, and drop the dynamite stick. It teetered for an instant on the stream's brink at his feet, then tumbled down the steep bank.

Boyd lunged for the falling dynamite stick in a final effort to carry out his plan. For a moment he was poised on the bank edge. Then he fell, as the sandy bank collapsed beneath his weight. The onlookers heard him scream as his own creation of roaring destruction pounced hungrily and took him into its raging maw.

They watched, stupefied, as the torrent roared past, portions of it slowed, as Martin Lee had hoped. Part of it raced on to destroy some of the fields where the banks had been made shallow in the leveling process. But all the irrigation ditches were filled, and the thirsty crops were gorged with enough water to assure a substantial harvest.

After the torrent had spent itself, two of the men went to look for the body of the man who had tried to destroy them. They might find it within an hour, or the silt might hold Gordon Boyd forever.

"I see it now," Mr. Dent remarked. "Gordon persuaded us all to expand this year, and lent us money for seed and tools—the loans to be paid off this fall. But if we couldn't have paid, all the farms would have become his."

Martin Lee understood. "He could have repaired the damage that the flood did to the land, and become sole owner of a huge irrigated valley. In a few years he would have been tremendously wealthy."

Mr. Dent nodded grimly.

The group broke up, as families went to inspect the damage done to their individual farms. It was late, and everyone was tired, Martin knew. The people needed rest, needed time to think and to plan. Today they had learned two things about the west: that water was more precious in this land than gold, and that one didn't expand for profit beyond nature's restrictions.

They would plant carefully and soundly in the future. There would be windmill pumps to guard against drought, but the farmers would not be wasteful with the water. They would conserve it as zealously as did the beaver. They would become good neighbors, and good friends of the wildlife refuge, and of Martin.

He said, glancing at Diana, "Guess I'd better go and check the damage done to the dam."

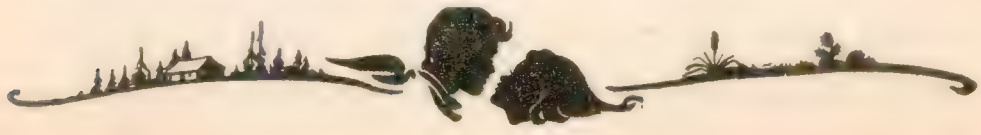
Mr. Dent nodded solemnly. "Tell the beaver we'll all be up tomorrow to help them repair it and to save the water."

"Yes, we'll be up tomorrow, Martin," Diana said, smiling.

"Tomorrow," said Martin, a promise in his voice that Diana did not reject.

He went to his horse, mounted, and waved a jaunty good-by.

And the warmth of Diana's response sent Martin Lee on his way whistling a jubilant tune.



OUT OF THE CHUTES

THE RODEO COWBOYS recently held their annual election of officers of the Rodeo Cowboys Association, and they chose Bill Linderman president for the sixth year in a row. It looks as though Bill has this difficult, unpaid job for life, if he'll put up with it.

Also returned to office were Eddy Ackridge as Bareback Director and Paul Bond as Contract Business Director. Todd Whatley, who served last year as Bull Riding Director, became Steer Wrestling Director.

Other event directors elected were Bill Ward in Saddle Bronc, Jim Shoulders in Bull Riding, B. J. Pierce in Calf Roping, Chuck Sheppard in Team Tying and John Pogue in Steer Roping.

The new directors took office April 1st, and the first thing they did was to promise the biggest and best year yet in rodeo. Then they settled down to their work, which is the task of making rodeos run smoothly. Their job is to settle disputes, listen to complaints, consider suggestions for improvements, and in general see to it that a fair shake is had by all —cowboys, producers and spectators.

It takes a lot of time all through the year, and yet all the Directors are also competing top-hands, standing high in the annual point scores in their events.

Two of the Directors, Eddy Ackridge and Jim Shouders, are the champions in their events, but the Directors are chosen by the membership more for their skill in handling people than in handling salty stock.

B. J. Pierce, by the way, may well be the calf-roping champ next year, as well as the director, if horses have anything to do with winning (and they have—plenty). He's bought a new roping pony named War Bar.

The sorrel was sired by Three Bars, one of the best sires of short-speed colts in the Southwest, and track experts rate War Bar AAA as a racer. He's a six-year-old stallion, partly trained for roping. B. J. has already started putting the finishing touches on him for arena competition.

It's a widely held theory that top-notch racing ponies make the best roping ponies, but few cowboys have a chance to test the theory because racers are so expensive. All foals from Three Bars come mighty high, for instance, because his stud fee is $1,000, which puts a whopping price tag on any colt of his even before its's born.

How much B.J. paid for War Bar is his secret, but he did say, "The ordinary cowboy couldn't afford to buy a horse like this. I feel lucky to have a chance to train him."

A news item from the Northwest came across our desk the other day, reporting that Deb Copenhaver, the saddle-bronc champion, was chosen Athlete of the Year by the sportswriters and broadcasters of the Inland Empire, an area which covers Washington, northeast Oregon, northern Idaho and western Montana. This award has been given for the past eight years, but this is the first time it has ever gone to a rodeo star.

The sportswriters and broadcasters started with a list of thirty nominees, which was narrowned down to ten by the votes of newspaper readers and radio and TV fans. The final choice was kept as secret as Hollywood's Academy Awards.

Speaking for the committee, Bill Boni, sports editor of the Spokane *Spokesman-Review,* said, "We had a lot of outstanding athletes on our list of nominations, but the big factors in Deb's favor were his national championship and his outstanding winning record in the Inland Empire. We regard him as a top competitor and an outstanding athlete in the finest tradition of sports."

Adios,

THE EDITORS

SIX GUN MAVERICK

By PHILIP KETCHUM

A sound startled Brad, and he whirled around, clawing up his gun

THE STORY SO FAR: BRAD HANNIGAN, falsely convicted of the murder of JOHN WYATT, is offered a parole by wealthy rancher MATT COMSTOCK if he will protect Comstock's property against small-rancher raids. Actually Comstock himself murdered Wyatt to gain Wyatt's control of the bank; and he intends to kill anyone else who gets in the way of his empire-building schemes. He has hired Brad in order to frame him for these killings. Comstock's daughter GWEN is attracted to Brad, and begins to suspect what her father is doing. Brad also suspects, and his chance to get proof comes when he meets DUTCH RHYMER and forces from him a confession that he is Comstock's hired gunman. On the run after being framed for the murder of small rancher DAVE ROSSITER, Brad leaves Rhymer, tied up, and his confession, for the sheriff's posse to find. But one of Comstock's men, BILL McGOWAN, finds Rhymer and kills him.

CONCLUSION

BRAD HANNIGAN visited the C Bar C that night. He pulled up just north of the ranch house buildings, an hour after dark, riding a horse that had gone lame. It was a wholly unplanned visit, a spur-of-the-moment necessity. If he meant to keep out of the hands of the posse, he needed a horse that could run. The closest place to get one when the emergency arose was the C Bar C ranch house.

He came to the corral, circled it to the gate, then eyed the three saddled horses tied outside. He could as well take one of these as one from the corral. They were ready to ride and didn't need roping.

It occurred to him to wonder how many of Comstock's crew were here tonight. At a guess, not many. He had spotted quite a few riding the posse. He glanced at the house. A dim light showed at the curtained parlor windows, and at the kitchen windows. The office and other rooms were dark. It seemed quite probable that Comstock and Gwen were away.

This probability gave him another idea. There would be coffee on the stove in the kitchen. He had had no decent coffee in four days, nothing warm for the past two, nothing at all since morning. He could already anticipate the taste of a chunk of meat, fresh bread, and coffee. He stood up, crossed through the darkness to the kitchen door, listened at it for a moment, then stepped inside.

The kitchen was empty, the curtains drawn. The lamp in a wall bracket had been turned low. On the back of the stove was the coffee pot. He found a cup and filled it. The coffee was black and strong and hot.

He gulped it down, filled the cup again, and then turned to the cooler, wondering what food might have been left from supper. But even as he opened it, a footstep in the hall startled him, and he whirled around, clawing up his gun. Immediately, he lowered it, put it away. Gwen was standing in the hallway.

"I was hungry," Brad said. "I can pay for the food."

He turned back to the cooler, found a plate of cold meat, and carried it to the table, keeping a watchful eye on the girl. He looked in one of the pans on the back of the stove. He was sure that any moment now he was going to have to make a break for the back door.

"You can sit down," Gwen said, without looking at him. "There's no one here you have to worry about. Most of the men are out searching for you. Father's in Mother's room. I think Mother's dying. Dr. Price is there."

Brad recalled the pleasant, gentle, quiet-mannered Ella Comstock. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

Gwen whirled on him. "Sorry! Can you be sorry about anything? What feelings do you have? What feelings can you have, to tie a man to a tree, then shoot him?"

Brad didn't know what she was talking about. "Whom did I tie to a tree and shoot?"

"A man named Rhymer. The posse saw your signal fire. They rode in and found what you meant them to find—a man tied to a tree, murdered,"

This was the first Brad had heard of what had happened to Rhymer. It was hard to believe. He sat down at the table, puzzling over it. Rhymer had been angrily alive when Brad had left the clearing. If the posse rode in and found him dead, someone else had seen the signal fire and beaten the posse there.

"I didn't kill Rhymer," he said aloud. "I left him tied to a tree, alive and cursing. In the breast pocket of his coat I left a note to the sheriff, and the money I found on him—money he had been paid for killing Dave Rossiter."

Gwen looked puzzled. "No one found the money or the note."

"Someone did," Brad answered. "Someone who reached the clearing after I left and before the posse got there."

"Were Kit Olsen and Dutch Rhymer working for my father?" Gwen asked suddenly. "Did he hire someone else to kill John Wyatt so he could gain control of the bank?"

Brad squirmed in his chair. "I don't know, Gwen."

"But that's what you think." Then she was silent for a time. When she spoke her words were so low he barely caught them. "If it is true, I think I'm glad Mother's dying—so she won't ever have to know."

SHE turned to the stove again, found a plate, and dished up his meal. She brought the plate to the table, poured him more coffee, then stepped back.

Brad said, "Thanks, Gwen," and then sat looking at her.

He found himself wishing that things could have been different between him and Gwen,

that he could have met and come to know her under more normal circumstances. She was the kind of girl a man could grow interested in, and keep interested in for a lifetime.

"You'd better eat your food before it gets cold," Gwen said.

"There's no hurry."

"Where will you go from here?"

"I don't know."

"If I could stop you from what you're trying to do, I would," Gwen said. "But I can't, can I?"

He shook his head, and watched her turn away and cross to the hall door. He thought she was leaving the room, but when she got there she stopped and stood looking back. Then someone who had come silently down the hall reached out, swept Gwen aside, and now stood in her place. It was a tall, thin man —Red Logan. An ugly, twisted look was on his face. He hadn't drawn his gun, but his hand was only inches away from it.

"Got you, Hannigan!" he shouted. "I knew I would, some day."

His hand slapped down to his holster, then whipped up. Brad heard the explosion of the shot as he caught and lifted the edge of the table and slid to the floor behind it. He grabbed at the gun he was wearing. Logan's second shot splintered through the table, passing inches from his head. He kicked the table over and, as it fell, he fired, twice.

One shot might have been enough. Logan twisted half around, fell against the wall and started sliding to the floor. Not far from him, Gwen crouched where she had fallen when he pushed her. A shocked look was in her eyes as she stared at him. Brad came quickly to his feet. He stepped to the lamp in the wall bracket, put it out, then swung to the door and opened it.

"Sorry, Gwen," he called over his shoulder.

If she answered, he didn't hear what she said. He looked into the yard. Four men from the bunkhouse were converging on the front door. He waited until they had it open and were stepping inside, then raced for the corral. He took the first of the three saddled horses tied there, and streaked south, toward Gunlock.

He followed the road several miles, then after a time pulled off to the side, reined up, and sat thinking. He had wondered why, after taking Rhymer, the posse had been so insistent in keeping after him. He knew the answer now. Rhymer had been found dead, and the death was charged to him. The account against him was growing heavier all the time.

He heard the sound of several horses on the road, coming this way from Gunlock, but he remained where he was, sure he was far enough from the road not to be seen. The horsemen passed him and continued on toward the ranch house. It seemed that the entire valley was involved in the one task of chasing Brad Hannigan—the C Bar C and the south flat ranchers as well.

It was time to stop running, Brad decided. It was time to pay a visit to Ed Franklin, who had managed the bank for years. Franklin would have access to the truth. Brad rode on south, toward Gunlock.

It was after midnight before he got there, making his approach from the west, avoiding the roads, on which he might have met some late traveler. In three of the houses near town there were lights, but most places were dark. On the main street the saloons too, would soon close.

Brad had no idea where Franklin lived, or how he could find him tonight. But in the morning, unless the banker had changed his habits, he would get to the bank by about seven-thirty. The bank didn't open for business until nine, unless someone hammered on the door and insisted on being let in. Tomorrow, early, Brad decided, someone would hammer on the door and make banker Franklin let him in.

He rode on. He came up behind storekeeper Herm Schwab's barn, dismounted, trailed the reins, and moved around to the barn doors.

They were stapled shut. The house was dark. Herm and his wife had undoubtedly gone to bed hours ago. Brad unlatched the doors and pulled them open enough to peer inside. He could hear and see nothing, but the place seemed empty. In another few minutes, he and the horse he had borrowed at C Bar C were inside and he had pulled the doors shut.

THE crowing of a rooster awakened him. He sat up, stiff, still tired, and inwardly protesting the coming dawn. In the barn it didn't look like morning; it looked like the middle of the night. Outside, however, a gray color would be creeping into the sky.

He stepped out into the yard and looked cautiously around. Two houses away, a woman in a red dress was hanging up her wash, but she didn't even glance in his direction. He angled toward the rear corner of the bank, every sense in his body sharply alert. If he met someone now who recognized him, he might never make it to Franklin.

He reached the side street and moved along it to the corner. He had seen no one so far but the woman in the red dress. However, as he turned to knock on the bank door, Herm Schwab came out on the porch of his store. And, farther up the street, to the north, two men, undoubtedly from the C Bar C, were riding into town.

Brad hammered on the bank door and stood there facing it, sideways, his back to Herm Schwab, and to the two men riding into town. He hammered on the door once more. It was solid, paneled one, and he couldn't see through it into the bank. There had been no side window to look through, either. He didn't know whether Franklin was here or not. To day, of all days, he might not have come to the bank early.

The men riding into town from the C Bar C hadn't stopped at the hotel or the Long Chance Saloon. They were still coming down the street, and were quite close. Brad didn't dare look around at them. He couldn't hear a thing from within the bank. Where was Ed Franklin? Why didn't he answer the door? Brad hammered on it again. He could feel his muscle tightening.

The door bolt clicked, and the door was suddenly pulled open, but only an inch or two. Franklin peered out at him, started a question, then broke it off and stared at Brad in wide-eyed, shocked surprise. Brad shoved forward, pushing the door wider. He stepped inside, closed it, and stood leaning against it. He had drawn his gun to cover the banker.

"Not a sound, Franklin," he ordered crisply. "Stay right where you are."

Franklin spoke in a husky whisper. "What do you want? What have I done to—"

"Just take it easy, Franklin," Brad advised. "There's no hurry about this. Let's go back to your office."

"You can't get away with this," Franklin said.

Brad motioned with his gun. "Back to your office."

Franklin walked that way, his shoulders not as square as usual. Brad followed him. In the office, the banker sank into the chair at his desk, seemingly grateful it was there.

"Franklin," Brad said bluntly, "I remember from past experience that you like to come right to the point, so we'll waste no time. I want to see a record of the transfer of a block of bank stock from John Wyatt to Matt Comstock. Dig it out."

Franklin moistesed his lips. "There was no such transfer."

"I think there was," Brad answered.

"I—it was a perfectly legal transfer of stock," Franklin stuttered then.

"I'm sure it was, or that it was made to look that way," Brad agreed. "Let's see the record."

Franklin's hands weren't very steady. He had to try the combination of the safe several times before he could work it correctly. When he finally had the safe open, he drew out a ledger and opened it to a page which he said showed the transfer of stock. The date of the transaction was seven years back, almost a year before Wyatt's death. Brad noted with considerable interest that at that time Wyatt had owned sixty percent of the bank's stock.

He looked up at the banker. "What happened to the money Wyatt got for his stock?"

"I don't know," Franklin said. "He didn't tell me what he was going to do with it."

"Show me where it was deposited in his account."

"It wasn't deposited in his account. He took it in cash."

"Then show me your receipt."

"I don't have the receipt any more. It was destroyed."

Brad shook his head. "It wasn't destroyed, Franklin. You never had it. John Wyatt

never was paid for his bank stock. He died owning more of this bank than Comstock did. The transfer of stock was a steal."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it? What would Ollie Tanhauser say?"

The startled look which leaped into Franklin's eyes gave Brad all the assurance he needed to go ahead. He waved his gun in the banker's face and said, "Franklin, reach for your pen, take a piece of paper, and start writing out the true story of the transfer of bank stock from Wyatt to Comstock. Write it the way it happened, and you may live to see another day. It's the only chance you have."

The banker reached for his pen. Brad stood waiting. Someone knocked on the street door and Franklin looked up, but Brad shook his head and the banker continued writing. Whoever was at the door went on knocking for a while, then stopped and apparently walked off.

FRANKLIN completed two pages in his scrawling handwriting, then signed and dated what he had written and looked up at Brad, his face gray, haggard. Brad reached for the two papers. He read what Franklin had written, glancing at the man now and then.

It was all there, just about as he had figured the story would be, but with an interesting addition. In blaming Comstock for what he had done, Franklin's words showed a bitterness that must have been of long standing. Perhaps the confession hadn't been hard. In it, he at least was settling some ancient grudge he had against the owner of the C Bar C.

"Who really owns the bank?" Brad asked bluntly.

"Matt Comstock and Kate Wyatt."

"And the majority stockholder?"

"Kate Wyatt."

"Write that down, too, on another paper," Brad ordered. "And write how the facts can be brought out to show it."

Franklin started writing. At the same time the hammering on the front door started up again. Brad was growing conscious of the pressure of time. He had here what he wanted, what he had come for. Kate Wyatt, after her talk with Ollie Tanhauser, wouldn't question it. And after tomorrow, or whenever Kate got back, Comstock would find himself without control of the bank, unable to call loans or force foreclosures.

That was all very well, but it didn't solve every problem Brad faced. Franklin's statement didn't clear him of the murder of John Wyatt, or wipe out the charges that he had shot Rossiter and tied up and killed Dutch Rhymer.

Franklin finished his second statement, signed it, and handed it to him. Brad read it, then folded it and put it in his pocket with the other paper.

He walked back to the bank door, opened it an inch or so, and shouted, "I want to see Carl Boswell, if he's in town, or Joe Allison." Allison was another of the south flats ranchers.

"Come out, Hannigan," someone shouted. "Come out with your hands up."

Step out with his hands up and get shot? Brad shook his head. Still at the edge of the door, he called, "Is Boswell in town?"

His answer, this time, came in the form of bullets. Two splintered into the wall only inches from where he was standing. As he dropped to the floor, he heard the window crashing under the blast of other bullets. He glanced back into Franklin's office. The banker was on the floor, under the knee hole of his desk.

"Hannigan," shouted the voice from outside. He recognized it now as the sheriff's voice. "Come out with your hands up or we'll come in after you."

Another shot splintered through the wall above Brad, then two more, but high, just above his head. He crawled away, back toward Franklin's office. He stopped behind the customers' counter.

A shot fired through the window ripped into the counter. There was a back door, always locked. He could get Franklin's key and unlock it, but by this time the men outside would have the back door covered. It looked as though he were trapped and there was no way out.

He dropped to the floor again as a dozen

bullets screamed through the broken window. He crawled to the opposite end of the counter, wondering how long he could hold out, how long it would be until some bullet reached him. A minute—ten minutes—an hour? He lay stretched out on the floor where he could watch the door. He thought bitterly that he had come awfully close to finding all the answers he needed, but coming close wasn't good enough. As things stood now, he had failed.

AS IT began to grow light that morning, Gwen made fresh coffee. She carried a cup to her father, who sat in a chair at the side of Ella's bed. He hadn't slept all night. He nodded his thanks for the coffee, but didnt' speak. Ella, lying motionless under the covers, seemed resting peacefully, and still was breathing. Gwen tip-toed from the room.

Tears squeezed from her eyes. She heard the murmur of her father's voice. She walked down the hall and stood at the bedroom door listening. Her father seemed to be talking about farms, and a new town to be built in the Wasatche Valley. His voice droned on and on. She returned to the parlor and woke Dr. Price.

"I think mother's conscious," she told him. "Father's talking to her."

Price got up and hurried to the bedroom. He was gone for only about ten minutes. When he returned he was shaking his head, and there was a dull look in his eyes.

"She's left us, Gwen," he said quietly.

"But I heard father talking to her."

"I know. He's still talking to her."

"But doesn't he realize—"

"I think he does. Maybe what he's doing is his way of saying good-by."

Gwen had known this moment would come, had steeled herself to face it. She took a deep breath and straightened. Both her hands were clenched. There was a feeling of emptiness inside her, and her throat had choked up.

"When I was in there," Dr. Price said, "your father was talking about farms here in the valley, everywhere, and of new families moving in. What's it all about? The Wasatche is cattle country."

Gwen didn't answer him. She was only dimly aware of what he said. She was thinking of what she had to do now. It wasn't the time for it; at a time like this she should give all the comfort she could to her father. Yet it couldn't be delayed any longer. As cruel as it seemed, it had to be talked out this morning.

Price went to the kitchen to get something to eat. Gwen waited in the parlor. When her father came in she noticed how his shoulders sagged, and the way the lines in his face had deepened.

"She's gone, Gwen," he said in a curiously flat voice.

"I know. The doctor told me," Gwen answered.

"I was talking, making believe she could hear me. I was telling her what I planned for the days ahead. We were supposed to go away."

"I'm going to tell you what she would have said if she could have heard you," Gwen said. "I've got to, father. Ella would have wanted me to."

He gave her a sharp look, then started toward his office door. "Some other time, Gwen."

"No," Gwen cried, "now! Listen to me, father, for here's what mother would have told you, if she could. She would have said that what you are doing is wrong. She would have said it was wrong to hire two men like Dutch Rhymer and Kip Olsen, and to pay them for the murder of Dave Rossiter."

Comstock stiffened. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"But I do," Gwen answered. "She would have said that—and she would have said it was wrong that you hired someone, long ago, to kill John Wyatt so you could gain control of the bank. She would have said it was wrong to bring Brad Hannigan back so he could be blamed for what happened, and wrong to try to drive the cattlemen from the south flats. She wouldn't have liked your plans, and in your heart you know it."

"I know nothing of the sort," Comstock shouted. "What's come over you, anyhow?"

"You taught me to look at things honestly, father. For a time I wouldn't; for a time I deceived myself. I can't any longer. Give

the bank back to Kate Wyatt. Call off the chase after Brad Hannigan. Then go to your big cities if you want to. Go anywhere. I don't care any more."

"Call off the chase?" he shouted. "I'll call off no chase. I'll lead it. Hannigan's brought enough trouble to this valley."

Hannigan was the man he had to take care of. It still hadn't been a bad plan to bring him back here. All that was left to do now was to finish what he had started. Let Hannigan die, and carry with him to the grave the blame for Wyatt's death and the death of Dave Rossiter. Then let Kate talk if she wanted to, she could prove nothing. Or let McGowan talk, if he dared—or Gwen. But he could handle Gwen, given the time. He would get her away from here. They would go back East.

HE STARTED for town, driving his horse at a reckless gallop. From far away he heard the sounds of shooting. It still continued when he reined up at the head of the main street, but the street was deserted. From the shelter of the corner of the store, Sam Dunlevy came running toward him.

"What the hell goes on?" Comstock shouted.

"We have Brad Hannigan cornered in the bank," Dunlevy answered.

Hannigan in the bank, where he could talk to Franklin, frighten the truth out of him? Comstock swung to the ground and tied his horse to a nearby fence. He was aware of a quickening excitement. It was lucky he had ridden here this morning. In another hour, or less, he could settle the biggest problem confronting him. He turned to face Dunlevy.

"Where's the sheriff?"

"He was with us, across the street from the bank, a minute ago, but he's in his office now with Kate Wyatt and some man who came in last night with Kate on the Santa Fe stage. They say he's a deputy U.S. marshal."

Comstock weighed this information uneasily. So Kate was back, with a deputy U.S. marshal. But what of it? If Hannigan and Franklin died there in the bank, what could a Federal lawman prove? Luckily, Kip Olsen and Dutch Rhymer couldn't tell him anything. Of course McGowan knew the truth about Rhymer. McGowan was someone to worry about.

"Let's get things organized," Comstock said. "Come on."

They circled back of the buildings until they came to the rear of the store, across the street from the bank. Eight men, summoned by Dunlevy, assembled there to face him. Five were men who rode for him, three were from the south flats. One of these was Bill McGowan.

Comstock felt the pressure of time. He didn't know what was happening in the sheriff's office, but it wouldn't make much difference, if Hannigan and Franklin could be disposed of before the conference was over. He stared at the men Dunlevy had called together, and made the mental draft of a quick plan.

"Dunlevy, you and Willie Rome and two more men cross the street north of here, and move down the opposite side to the bank. McGowan, Jennings, and you other two fellows can cross to the south and approach from that angle. I'm going out front.

"I'll call to Hannigan, get his attention, start talking to him. He's cornered; I think he'll be willing to talk. When you're in position and I've spotted where he is, we'll close in. McGowan and Jennings, cover the window. The rest of us will rush the door. Remember what I offered for Hannigan before—two thousand to the man who gets him, and can prove it."

He followed McGowan and Jennings with his eyes as they turned south back of the buildings, and he noticed how McGowan lagged back. He heard a burst of shooting from the street and from the bank, and glanced around. No one was near him, no one was watching him.

He whipped up his gun to take a quick shot at McGowan, sure that if he dropped him it would be blamed on a wild bullet, or even on Hannigan. He squeezed the trigger but, as he did, McGowan swung around to look back at him, and saw him with the leveled gun in his hand.

His shot missed, but McGowan knew what had been intended. Terror froze on his face. He dived for the protection of the corner of

the building. Comstock fired once more, but missed again. He reloaded his gun, angry with himself for having wasted two shots, and for having let McGowan know what he intended. It meant he was going to have to be damned careful about stepping into the street to talk to Hannigan. McGowan was the kind of a man who could shoot him in the back.

Comstock waited for two minutes, then moved toward the street. He glanced up and down it and was surprised. McGowan hadn't stayed in hiding, as he had expected. Instead, he had crossed the street with Jennings.

Comstock hesitated, then stepped into view, watching McGowan. But McGowan didn't lift his gun. Jennings said something to him and McGowan nodded. They started toward the bank.

Comstock watched them thoughtfully. Jennings noticed him and made a depreciating gesture toward McGowan. Comstock nearly laughed. He understood now why McGowan was across the street. Jennings had made him stick with him, even though he knew he could count on him for little help, and McGowan, hadn't had the strength to back out.

He wasn't. Comstock would make sure of that when the firing got heavy. But right now he didn't have to worry about the man. He stared at the bank where Hannigan was cornered, and then stood waiting for those who were closing in to draw still closer.

THE bank was covered from every angle; Brad was sure of that. Through the broken side window, those across the street could get a partial glimpse of the interior. This, and the occasional shots ripping through the walls, did considerable to limit Brad's movements.

He could cover the door and window from the far end of the counter, where there was an opening to the lobby. But he couldn't, at the same time, cover the window to Franklin's private office, or the back door. Perhaps those outside didn't know that. He hoped they didn't. A shout from the street caught his

[*Turn page*]

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attention. It sounded like Comstock. Brad waited, listening.

"Hannigan, can you hear me? I want to talk to you."

It was Comstock; Brad was sure of it now. He came to his feet, standing sideways in the room, facing the window, the street door on his left, the door to Franklin's office on his right.

"Sure I can hear you," he answered. "What do you want?"

"We're coming in after you, Hannigan."

A shadow fell across the window. Part of a man's figure showed there briefly. A gun thrust into the room exploded in a wild probing shot. Brad fired back as the man fell away. He heard him scream and, along with the sound, bullets came splintering into the bank. He hunkered down close to the floor, waiting.

Brad glanced toward the door to Franklin's office. He had been right in guessing that someone besides the banker was in there, that someone had come through the window. It was Frenchie Aumont. The Texas gunhawk finally had made his move, had stepped into view, and was firing at him. Brad felt a blow in the side, a hard numbing blow which was followed by a burning pain. He steadied his gun arm and drove a shot at Aumont, then another. Aumont staggered backward, twisting toward Franklin's desk. He fell across it.

Jennings was at the window again. Brad fired at him as he fell away, then fired again and heard the hammer of his gun click against an empty shell. He straightened a little as he broke his gun and started to reload it. Dunlevy now lay motionless in the doorway, but someone else had taken his place. Matt Comstock!

Comstock caught sight of Brad as he straightened. He screamed, "I've been saving this for you, Hannigan."

He fired too quickly, before his gun was centered, but he wouldn't miss the next time. Brad knew that, and knew there was nothing he could do about it. There wasn't even time to try to duck out of the way. Comstock steadied his aim. A flash of triumph showed in his eyes, then faded, and his head jerked back. His body started sagging. In his temple a dark hole had appeared. As Brad stood watching, Comstock's knees folded and he pitched to the floor.

Brad whirled to shoot a quick look at the window from which Comstock must have been shot. He saw McGowan standing there in a half crouch, the gun which had fired the shot still in his hand. He heard another shot, this one from Willie Rome, who was prone on the floor.

A high, whimpering cry broke from McGowan's throat. He dropped his gun, clutched at his chest, then staggered backward out of sight.

The pain in Brad's side seemed to choke off all feeling in his legs, and was reaching up now to his chest and arms. He had finished reloading his gun, but wasn't sure he could lift it. He stared dully at the door.

The firing from outside had stopped. He could hear the voices of men arguing in the street, one voice louder and more commanding than the others, but he couldn't pick up what the argument was about. His mind was getting foggy.

"Hannigan," a voice called, "I want to come in and talk to you. My name's Eldridge. I'm from the United States Marshal's office in Santa Fe."

"Come ahead," Brad answered.

He watched the man who appeared and entered the bank, stepping over the bodies of Sam Dunlevy and Matt Comstock. He was tall, thin, hawk-faced, middle-aged. His gun was holstered, but Brad had a notion he could draw it mighty fast if he needed it.

"Quite a fight you put up, Hannigan," Eldridge said. "I hate to do this, but I'm going to have to lodge you in jail for a while."

"In jail?" Brad said.

"More as a matter of protection than anything else," Eldridge said. "In a day or two you may get out. Any objections?"

"I'm not sure I can walk that far," Brad said thickly.

"Then I'll help you," Eldridge said.

He started around the counter. Brad waited for him.

He had no idea how Eldridge had happened to come into the picture. He didn't know that Kate Wyatt had brought him back with her from Santa Fe, or that his long fight to clear himself was nearly over.

AS IT worked out, they didn't take Brad to jail. Instead they took him to the home of Dr. Price, who probed his side for a bullet, then bandaged the wound and kept him in bed for a week, each day bringing him an account of the developments in and around Gunlock.

Franklin's written confession, which had been found in Brad's pocket, and which the banker had confirmed, disclosed Kate Wyatt's ownership of the majority of the bank stock. She had taken charge of the bank, but had brought in a man from Santa Fe to manage it. For the present, at least, no loans were being called, which was reassuring news to the south flats ranchers.

The threat of a range war seemed over. Gwen had fired the gunhawks working for her father, and was managing the ranch with half a crew. A few men were in jail—Franklin, Jennings and, for some reason not clear to the doctor, Art Kell. The marshal who had come to town with Kate Wyatt was still in the saddle, so far as law enforcement was concerned. The sheriff had resigned, and a new man was to be appointed to finish out his term. A man who worked for Tom Elliott was in line for the job.

"There's also a rumor going around that you didn't kill Dave Rossiter," the doctor told Brad. "They say now that Dutch Rhymer killed him and that McGowan killed Rhymer. They say Eldridge has the dope to prove it."

"And the charge that I killed John Wyatt?" Brad asked.

"I haven't heard anything about that," Price answered.

Two weeks later there was a hearing in the court house. In a sense it was a trial, for it concerned the charges against Brad Hannigan. Gwen Comstock, looking pale and tired, told of her capture by Kip Olsen and Dutch Rhymer, and stated quite bluntly that Rhymer had boasted of the murder of Dave Rossiter. She was followed on the stand by several of Rossiter's riders, who had witnessed the murder and who recalled that the shot which had killed Rossiter came from a direction other than that taken by Brad when he fled.

[*Turn page*]

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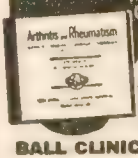

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Eldridge next introduced as evidence a note in Brad's handwriting, found on McGowan's body, which was the note Brad had left in Rhymer's pocket with the money. A member of the posse told of how McGowan had gone on ahead that morning, and of how he had joined the posse after they found Rhymer's body. The bank records showed that McGowan had deposited almost eight hundred dollars to his account, two days later. The inferences seemed clear.

One other man appeared at the hearing—Lou Nary. He gave a halfway honest account of the fight at his ranch, clearing Brad of any blame and aligning himself with the now-winning side.

That night Eldridge came to see Brad. They sat on the porch of the doctor's house and talked until quite late.

"There are still a couple of things to work out before you are completely free," Eldridge said. "I'm referring to those killings you were involved in down in Texas, after Wyatt's death and before they caught you. I've written down there. Since the men you shot were men with records, men the law was after, I don't imagine we'll have much trouble talking them out of prosecuting you. But the law's the law, and it's an angle I want to clear up."

"What about Wyatt's death?" Brad asked.

"I have Kell in jail. He's admitted that when he and McGowan rode after the man who killed Wyatt, they met Comstock. Comstock told them he had seen you riding furiously away. But Kell says the tracks they followed were Comstock's. I might be able to make something of that in court, but it's not proof. The rumor going around is that Comstock hired someone to kill Wyatt. Why not let it rest there? Gwen has enough to carry as it is."

"Yes, let it rest there," Brad said.

Merle came to see him the next day. Her mother had been by on several occasions, but this was Merle's first visit. She looked beautiful—tall, slender, golden-haired, all that a man could want in a woman. Her hand was soft and warm in his, and she left it there for a moment after she greeted him, a flood of color showing in her cheeks.

"Brad," she said, "I've been talking to Mother. We both think it would be nice if you came out to our place when Dr. Price lets you go."

BRAD'S heart started pounding faster. He knew with full assurance what lay behind Merle's offer. He could read it in her expression, in the look in her eyes. He could go out to the Wyatt's and stay there the rest of his life.

The closeness between him and Merle would be like it had been before. Never in all his imaginings had he thought the future would hold anything like this. But something troubled him, something in what Merle had said. He tried to isolate what it was, but couldn't.

"The doctor won't keep you here much longer," she continued. "Maybe next week some time we could drive in and get you."

There it was; he had it now. What bothered him was Merle's use of the word "we." She hadn't said that this was something she wanted, or would do. She had said "we," including her mother. It was a little thing, and in this instance perhaps unimportant, but it pointed to a dependence in Merle's character he would never be able to overcome.

If he married Merle she would live in his shadow the rest of her life, a beautiful possession but empty of any of the challenge he might find in an independent mind. He shook his head, smiling in an effort to take out of his words as much of the sting as he could.

"Tell your mother it's a generous offer, and thank her for me, but I think when I'm better I'll go away for a time."

Merle didn't stay long after that. For the rest of the day Brad felt uneasy, and not sure he had done the right thing. It could have been much easier for him at the Wyatt ranch than striking off on his own.

He had other visitors in the days that followed, but the one he was waiting for didn't come. He wanted to see Gwen again. One afternoon she did come. He was out on the porch when she rode up. He came to his feet as she dismounted and walked toward him. She still looked tired, a thin, boyish figure in jeans, a blouse, and a sweater.

She said, "Hello, Brad. When are you coming back to work?"

He was too startled at the question to give an answer.

"Once when I was talking to my father about you," she continued, "he told me that when he talked to you at the prison, you agreed to work on the C Bar C. A bargain's a bargain."

"I wasn't sure you'd want me," Brad said doubtfully.

She smiled. "I've discovered that running a ranch is quite a job. I need help."

"It'll be a week before I can ride, a month before I can stay in the saddle all day."

"I can hold out for a week, and for another three I can see that your orders are carried out."

A grin broke across his face. "Could you take orders, Gwen?"

"If I thought they were the right orders. If I didn't, you'd have an argument on your hands. In fact, that might happen quite often."

They both laughed.

"Come up on the porch," Brad suggested. "Stay for a while."

She shook her head. "I can't; I have too much to do. See you in a week, Brad."

She started away, then turned back, her expression quite sober. "Some day," she said, "I want to talk to you about father. I want to show you some maps I found in his safe which explain why he wanted to gain control of the valley. I want to tell you what he was like before this idea hit him. And I want to talk about Mother, too, and tell you what she said about him, and what I said to him the morning he was killed."

"There'll be time for that," Brad said.

He watched her hurry off to where she had tied her horse, swing to the saddle, and ride away. He sat down again and leaned back in his chair, smiling and projecting his thoughts ahead.

He didn't know yet, couldn't know yet what his work on the C Bar C would lead to, but it would at least give him and Gwen a chance to get to know each other. He felt amazingly better. He supposed it was natural that he should. He had a job to go to when he left here—perhaps a lifetime job.

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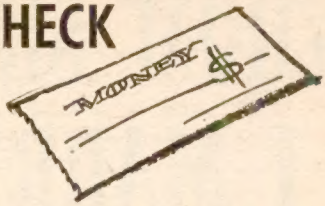

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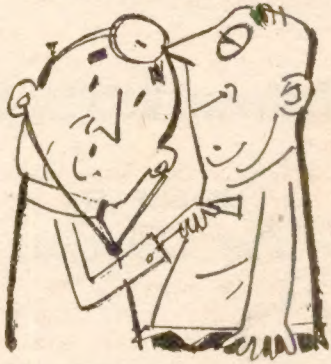

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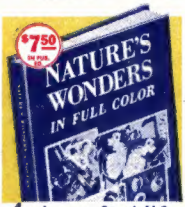

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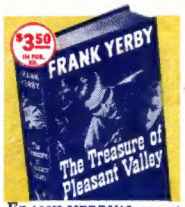

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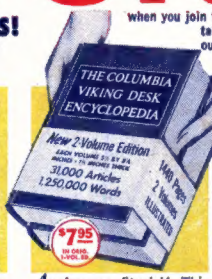

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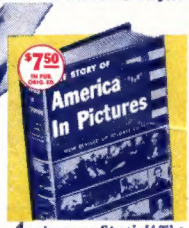

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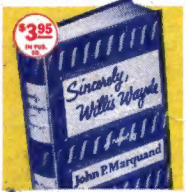

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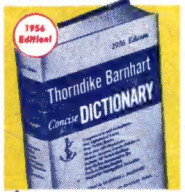

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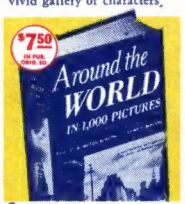

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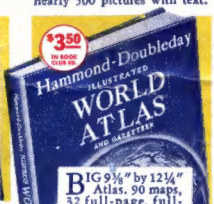

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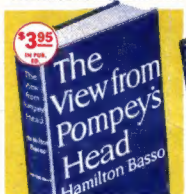

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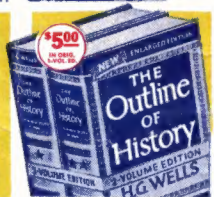

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